

J-Steedman
The Madonna of the goldfinch

READING ROOM

A308964

NY PUBLIC LIBRARY THE BRANCH LIBRARIES



3 3333 06037 8920

READING ROOM

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT

CHILDREN'S ROOM

READING ROOM

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT

CAL

FALL 1901

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

THE MADONNA OF
THE GOLDFINCH





The Madonna of the Goldfinch.

THE MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH

BY AMY STEEDMAN



EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS IN
COLOUR BY E. M. STEEDMAN

LONDON: T. C. & E. C. JACK, LTD.
35 PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.
AND EDINBURGH

TO
NELL

TO
NELL

11ef.
5-5

DNA-
A308967-

ABOUT THIS BOOK

WHEN summer is ended and the trees have shed their leaves, and bitter winds sweep over the bare, dreary garden, one looks back wistfully to the sunny days gone by, when skies were blue and flowers made the earth gay with their beauty.

So in this grey time of war, when the world seems changed and grown sad, I find myself looking back wistfully to the peaceful, happy days it was once my lot to spend in Italy. These stories are about the children and places I knew and loved in that beautiful land, and I have written them down in the hope that they may hold in them some faint fragrance of those dear days of happy memory, even as a handful of dried rose leaves or sweet lavender brings with it a breath of summer, and so is made welcome when the flowers are dead.

AMY STEEDMAN.

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT

LIST OF STORIES

THE MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH	I
THE WHISPERING SHELL	II
GODMOTHER'S GIFTS	21
THE STORY OF MARGUERITE'S LOCKET	
TONINO'S CRUCIFIX	46
S. MARTIN'S PURSE	54
HEARTSEASE	72
SANDRO'S SEARCH	79
THE COMING OF THE KING	98
ALESSANDRO	117
THE GOLDEN KEY	131
SIGNOR PICCIONE	145
THE MAGIC MIRROR	153
THE STEEP ASCENT	170

LIST OF PLATES

The Madonna of the Goldfinch	<i>Frontispiece</i>
The Madonna's Shrine.	18
The sweet face of the Madonna looked out of a pale gold background	32
The Madonna looked down from her marble pedestal	72
The procession of priests passed in	94
Alessandro	120
The procession wound its way along	136
Grandmother was sitting near the doorway of the little house	162

THE MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

MARIETTA sat on the doorstep busily plaiting the long straws into smooth braids, and there was a serious look upon her face. The sunbeams were playing hide-and-seek in the golden brown of her curly hair, warming her little bare toes, and showing up clearly the many patches on her old blue petticoat ; but she was too busy with her thoughts to smile back a welcome to the dancing sunlight as she usually did. The swift movement of her small brown fingers, as they plaited the straws in and out, was like the work of a machine ; for it was easily seen that Marietta was thinking of something far away and much more interesting than plaits of straw.

In the distance, below in the valley, the thin veil of the morning mist hung like a cobweb of opal-tinted gossamer round the great domes and towers of Florence, showing here and there at a

2 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

bend the silver thread of the winding Arno. It was the sight of those domes and the tall tower of the Palazzo Vecchio which had set Marietta thinking so deeply.

Only the week before she had gone with her father on Sunday morning into the great city, and had walked under the shadow of that tall tower. Together they had climbed the marble staircase of the old palace, and entered suddenly into a world of such magic beauty that she had dreamed of it ever since. It almost bewildered her to try to remember those wonderful pictures that lined the walls. The glory of the gold had dazzled her eyes; the wonderful colours, pure and fresh as the petals of spring flowers, had made it seem to her like a glimpse of heaven, where the Madonna and all the saints sit in glory. But in all the confusion of delight there was one picture which stood out clear and distinct, one picture that she had loved best of all. The others had made her feel a little shy, as if her bare feet and patched petticoat were not fit to be in such grand company; but this one picture was like a friend. There the gentle Madonna looked just as Marietta had often seen her mother look down on little Giulietto, as he played about her knee; and the meaning of the picture was so easy to understand.

MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH. 3

S. John had caught a little goldfinch, and had brought it to give to the Gesu Bambino, handling it perhaps a little roughly, as boys are apt to do. But the Gesu Bambino's hands were gentle and kind. With protecting love He curved one little hand over the frightened bird, as if to guard it with His loving care. It reminded her of what the old priest had so often said to the village children: "Remember that all helpless animals, however small, belong to the Gesu Bambino, and He loves each one. If you hurt one of His creatures, you hurt the Master Himself."

"Marietta, Marietta," cried a voice from inside the house, "is thy work not finished yet?"

Marietta started, and her fingers flew quicker than ever.

"Only one more bundle to plait, Mammina," she called back cheerfully.

"I fear thou hast been dreaming as usual," said her mother, coming to the door and looking reprovingly at the bundle of straws still unplaited. "It is almost time that thou shouldst set out to carry the braids into the city. Thou hast worked hard, and dost well deserve the new shoes which the money will buy."

Marietta nodded her head gleefully, never stopping her busy plaiting. How she had longed and

4 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

waited for those shoes, and how good it was to think that this very afternoon she would take the last of the straw braids to the hat-shop in the city, and receive enough money to make up the sum which was needed to pay for the shoes of her dreams! She had never had a new pair of shoes before, and it would be a red-letter day in her life. She wriggled her little bare brown toes in the warm dust, and laughed a gay little laugh to herself as she thought of those beautiful shining shoes, with good thick soles and stout laces, which would so soon be hers, to be worn on Sundays and holidays. The vision of those wonderful shoes quite put to flight the remembrance of the picture about which she had been dreaming.

“There!” she exclaimed at last with a sigh of pleasure, jumping up and shaking out her apron. “The last straw is finished, and the braid is ready, the saints be praised!”

Very soon she too was ready to start for the distant city. She only needed to smooth her hair and tie her yellow handkerchief neatly under her chin. Then, from the old chest in the corner, her mother took a little cotton bag and counted out the money which Marietta had already earned towards the new shoes. This was carefully knotted into the corner of an old handkerchief and put in the bottom

of the pocket which was tied securely round Marietta's waist, under her scanty petticoat.

"I will pack the braids into the old basket," said her mother; "then when it is empty thou canst put the new shoes into it and carry them safely home. Be sure that thou art a careful little maid, and make a wise choice; and let them be large enough, for it will be many a long day ere thou canst have another pair."

Marietta nodded her head solemnly. She needed no words to tell her how great a responsibility rested on her shoulders that day. She walked along rather soberly at first, she was so anxious to be careful and wise; but very soon the delicious warmth of the spring sunshine, the flowers peeping through the hedges, and above all the thought of the new shoes, made her break into little skips of delight.

It was a long dusty road that led down to the city, and Marietta was not sorry to reach at last the great gates, and to slip through the shouting throng that crowded round the custom-house, and so into the quiet streets beyond. It was easy work then to find her way to the river-side, and across the old bridge with its quaint rows of shops, and then on to the busy narrow street where the straw-hat makers drove their brisk trade. Here she

6 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

delivered her braids and duly received her money ; and this she carefully tied in another corner of the old handkerchief, for she was afraid if she carried it in her hand she might lose it before she reached the boot shop.

With the old empty basket on her arm she set out once more, and had gone but a little way when a crowd of noisy boys turned into the narrow street, their shouts and laughter mingling with the loud yelps of a little white dog that barked at their heels.

Marietta drew hastily aside into the shelter of a dark doorway. She mistrusted noisy boys, and always tried to keep out of their way. Then as the crowd stopped for a moment, just opposite the doorway where she stood half hidden, she gave a little gasp of terror at the sight which met her eyes. One of the biggest boys held a tiny dun-coloured mouse dangling by a string, which was cruelly knotted round its little leg. Laughing and shouting with glee, he held it just out of reach of the dog that leapt upwards, almost turning a somersault in its wild anxiety to get at the poor little hunted creature. Then the other boys seized the dog and held it back, while the mouse was let down to run along the road, only to be jerked back again by the cruel string just before

the dog had time to seize it. Once again the dog was held back, and again the terrified mouse was set down ; but this time there was some one quicker than the dog. Marietta darted out and caught the little creature in both her hands, and then turned on the crowd of shouting boys with eyes that blazed with anger.

“ Wicked animals that ye are ! ” she panted. “ I would I were a man, for then I would whip every one of you. I would tie a string to your legs and set a roaring, raging lion loose to chase you.”

The roars of the raging lion could scarcely have been louder and fiercer than the shouts of rage and anger that burst from the lips of the boys as they surrounded her. But the more they shouted and threatened, the firmer Marietta stood, holding the little creature tight in her hands, and feeling its heart beating in terror, just as wildly as her own heart was doing, in spite of the brave face she kept.

But now the cruel boys were pulling at the string which was still tied to the mouse’s leg, and Marietta was in despair, until she suddenly thought of a plan.

“ Will you give me the mouse if I pay you two pennies for it ? ” she gasped.

That was worth considering, and the string was immediately slackened.

8 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

“Show us the two pennies first,” cried the boys.

“Then hold off the dog, and let no one come near me,” said Marietta; and carefully freeing one hand, she felt in the depth of her under pocket and brought out the old handkerchief with the knots tied so securely in the corners.

There was a forward movement of the boys; in a flash a dozen hands snatched at the handkerchief, and before Marietta realized what had happened, she was left alone in the silent street, her money all gone, and only the tiny throbbing creature left in her hand.

Yes, it was quite true: all the money she had saved and worked for, the money which was to buy her those wonderful shoes, was quite, quite gone! The crowd of boys had vanished as if by magic. A great sob rose in Marietta's throat, and she leant against the wall, burying her face in her arm, and crying as if her heart would break. Then something moved, soft and warm, in the shelter of her protecting hand, and she tried to choke back her sobs and brush aside her tears, that she might see what she could do for the cause of all her woe. The cruel cord was knotted tightly round the little leg; and it was some time before she could unloose it, for she was afraid of hurting the helpless creature. But at last it was done, and she let the

mouse fall, to run into a hole at the side of the pavement.

Marietta felt happier as she watched the dun-coloured streak disappear into the hole. She was glad the mouse was safe, but even as she looked down, the sight of her little dusty feet reminded her of her loss, and the tears filled her eyes again. Slowly and listlessly she walked down the street. She must go home by some different road, for she could not bear to pass the boot-shop now, and see those rows of shoes hanging so temptingly outside the door. Very drearily she threaded her way through narrow by-streets, until she came to a part of the city she scarcely knew. The shops were larger and much grander here, and she stopped before one whose windows were full of pictures, and then drew a long deep breath of pleasure. There in the very middle was a picture, a copy of her favourite "Madonna of the Goldfinch." Marietta pressed close to the window to see it better. Yes, there were the gentle Mother, the gay, thoughtless little S. John; and there was the Gesu Bambino, holding His hand so lovingly over the tiny bird.

"Do not hurt it," He seemed to be saying. "I love every one of My tiny creatures, and those who hurt them hurt Me."

10 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

A deep rush of joy filled Marietta's heart. Why, of course, the mouse she had saved belonged to Him, and in helping it she had really been doing a service for Him. What did the shoes matter after all? She looked with adoring eyes at the little figure standing there, one tiny bare foot placed so lovingly upon his mother's.

Then a gay smile spread over Marietta's face, and her eyes shone.

"Why, the Gesu Bambino has no shoes either," she whispered to herself contentedly.

THE WHISPERING SHELL.

THE sun was sinking in the west, and it filled the sky and sea with a golden glory. It caught the sails of the fishing boats as they sailed slowly out to the lagunes, and turned them into shining flecks of crimson, white, and yellow, until they looked like a flight of gay butterflies hovering over the clear golden water. The boats moved but slowly, for the breeze was light, and it was some time before they all got clear away from the wide canal of S. Pietro, where they had been anchored.

One by one the sails caught the breeze outside the sheltering canal and sailed gaily away, until only one boat was left behind to hoist its sails and cast adrift. The men on board were cheerily pulling at the ropes, and the great orange-coloured sails began to swell out as the boat slowly left its moorings, when a sharp cry rang out from the shore.

“Father, father!” screamed a little shrill voice.

"Oh, father, thou hast gone away without me!"

The big fisherman at the ropes stood up and waved his hand cheerfully.

"Go home, and be a good boy," he shouted back. "Then—who knows—perhaps I may take thee to-morrow."

The only answer was a scream of disappointment from Beppi as he ran up and down the pavement in front of the old church, where the boats anchored, and waved his arms in a furious rage and cried most bitterly.

"Wilt thou not put back and take me to-night?" he sobbed.

"No, no," cried his father over the widening stretch of water. "It is too late to-night. Go home to thy mother."

The little white dog on board barked in sympathy with Beppi's cries, and the neighbours on shore smiled when they heard the noisy chorus.

"'Tis the same story every time the boat sets out," they said. "Beppi has a hopeful heart. 'Tis always to-morrow that he hopes to be taken to the fishing."

But Beppi took no heed of them. He was too full of angry disappointment, and he ran swiftly

home, sobbing all the way, as soon as the yellow sail had turned the corner.

"There, there, thou art a foolish child," said Beppi's mother, as he flung himself down on the floor and hid his face in her petticoat. "Thy father cannot take thee, and it is useless to expect it. Thou art too small, and would only come to some harm."

"I could help him," came the smothered answer choked with sobs.

"What help could such tiny hands give?" asked his mother, lifting one of his little brown clenched fists in hers.

Beppi lifted his flushed, tear-stained face and looked at her solemnly.

"I can knot a rope more firmly than thou canst, Mammina," he said proudly, "and I can hold an oar."

"And fall into the canal two or three times a week," said his mother, shaking her head. "I wonder which of the sea-fairies came to thy christening, and what charm they gave thee to draw thee always to the sea, so that thou canst never be content on land."

"It was no sea-fairy at all," said Beppi triumphantly. "But I will tell thee what it is, for I know. It was the Madonna herself, and she put one of

14 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

the tiny whispering shells close to my heart, and it always whispers and whispers of the sea, and calls me all day long."

"I would the Madonna had put a seed of contentment there instead," said his mother—"something that would whisper of obedience and call thee to do what thy mother bids thee, instead of playing among the boats, falling into the water, and screaming because thy father will not take thee to the fishing."

Beppi looked at the dishes he had been told to wash, and the cradle he had been set to rock, and he sighed deeply.

"It seems a pity it was the whispering shell she chose," he said. "The other would have been pleasanter for thee."

"And pleasanter for thee too, foolish little one," answered his mother. "Some day thou wilt learn that obedience is best of all. It is the lesson of the Gesu Bambino, and until thou hast learnt that thou wilt never be content, even if thou shouldst go sailing in thy father's boat."

But Beppi was not listening to her words at all. His thoughts were busy with a splendid plan which had just come into his head. If his father would not take him fishing in the big boat, he would go by himself the very next day in the

little boat which lay at the side, and which he could easily untie. He felt sure he could guide it with an oar, and he would go far away out over the lagunes, away to the tiny islands whose long reflections seemed always beckoning to him; and when he returned his father would see how well he could manage a boat, and how useful he would be at the fishing, and there would be no more talk of leaving him behind.

So the very next evening, when the big boat was anchored close to the marble pavement, and his father was eating his supper before making ready to sail, Beppi came stealing down to the waterside, and ran swiftly across the plank into the big boat, as he had often done before. No one noticed him particularly as he climbed about the ropes, and no one saw him drop stealthily over the side into the little boat that lay close by, made fast by a knotted rope.

It was an easy matter to untie the rope, for Beppi had clever fingers for any work that he cared to do; then he shoved off, and in a moment the boat was caught in the current and went gaily floating away. There was no need to use the oar, the current was so strong, and it soon carried him far out from the land, away to the distant sea which he had longed to reach.

"We shall have rough weather to-night," said Beppi's father a little later, as he and his partner climbed into the boat and looked anxiously at the sky, where the great thunder-clouds were rising up to meet the wind. "Haul in the boat and let us be off."

"Some one has done that for us already," said the other man, peering over the side. "The boat is gone."

Just then an anxious voice sounded from the shore.

"Is Beppi aboard? Perhaps he is hiding there. I cannot find the child anywhere," shouted his mother.

"No, he's not here, and neither is the little boat," said his father grimly. "If he has been meddling with it, he shall know what it means to be soundly thrashed when I find him."

The news soon spread through the fishing quarter that Beppi and the little boat were both missing.

"Did any of you children see him go?" asked his mother anxiously of the crowd of little brown-faced, bare-footed children that were playing there.

"Oh yes, we saw him," they cried. "He was sailing away out there;" and they pointed vaguely to the horizon, now heavy with purple clouds.

The poor mother wrung her hands.

“Now may the saints protect him !” she cried. “He will certainly be drowned, for the storm will soon break, and he is too small to manage the boat.”

She looked anxiously at the sky. It was already black with clouds, and the wind was beginning to howl, and little fretful waves began to beat angrily against the sides of the big boat.

“We must sail with the current, and perchance we may overtake him yet before he comes to any harm,” said his father, speaking as cheerfully as he could ; and soon the great sails were set and the boat went swinging out before the wind.

But all night long the two men searched in vain. The rain lashed their faces and the wind screamed so wildly that they could scarcely see a yard ahead or hear each other speak, and they knew it was hopeless to look for the boat till the dawn should break. Even then, when light filtered through in the east and the wind began to fall, the tired fishermen had little hope left to cheer them on.

It was light enough now to see far ahead, and the blinding rain had stopped, so their eyes could sweep the water in all directions in search of the tiny boat. But the father’s heart was almost too heavy to look. There was but a poor chance

that the tiny craft could have lived through such a night, and even if it was still afloat, where might it not have drifted by this time, with only those small hands to guide it ?

"What is that ?" cried the other fisherman excitedly, pointing to a black speck in the distance.

"It is only the Madonna's shrine," said the father.

"But there is a boat there, tied to the pale," said the fisherman, gazing outward with keen, narrowed eyes.

"Some one has gone to trim her lamp," said the father.

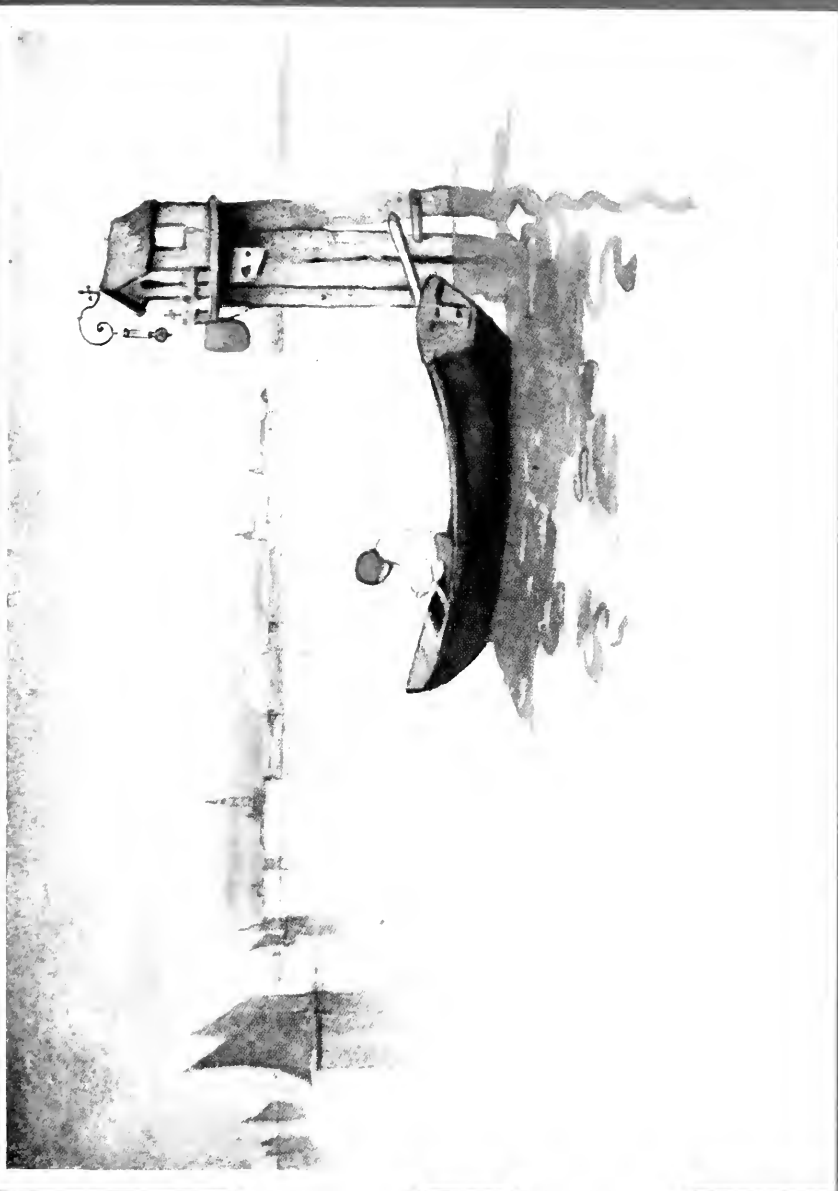
But nevertheless with beating hearts they steered their boat towards the distant shrine.

"The saints be praised !" they exclaimed together as they came nearer. "It is surely our boat. Perhaps the child is safe after all."

The boat was rocking idly to and fro, tied to one of the old gray water pales, and it seemed to be empty ; but as they shouted a small bundle in the boat shook itself, and stood upright and waved its arms.

It was not long before Beppi was safe aboard, wrapped in his father's coat, and the yellow sails gleamed in the sunlight as the boat sped homewards. His mother was waiting for him and

The Madonna's Shrine.





carried him up in her arms, and, safe at home, stripped his little shivering body of its soaking wet clothes, and rolled him in a blanket. Then as she chafed his cold feet she listened to his tearful story.

“The boat went on and on, and I was so happy, until the wind began to blow and the rain came on. Then it grew so dark and the waves were so high that I was frightened and cried out for help. The wind took the white tops off the waves and blew them in my face, and the boat turned round and round, sometimes going one way and sometimes another. Then suddenly I saw the Madonna’s lamp, and the boat bumped against one of her pales. I tied the rope round quickly, for I knew I would be safe if I could keep near to the Madonna whose light warns the fishing boats off the quicksands. It was very cold and very wet, but I think I went to sleep, for by-and-by I dreamed that the Madonna came and took me in her arms and made me quite happy, and I heard her tell me that the whispering shell had not been her gift at all, and I was to listen to it no more, but to learn the lesson of obedience, which was worth all the whispering shells in the world.”

“I am glad she told thee that,” said his mother, “and thou wilt never forget her words.”

His father smiled grimly as he listened. "And if a good sound whipping will help thee to remember," he said, "thou shalt have it, I promise thee. Only wait till all this water is squeezed out of us both, and I will begin at once to teach thee how to learn the Madonna's lesson."

GODMOTHER'S GIFTS.

THE beautiful old room was a fair setting for the dainty old lady who sat there, surrounded by her treasures. It was a large, lofty room, and the flickering blue flames which leapt up the great chimney from the log fire on the hearth could not light up its dim and distant corners. There the shadows gathered and hung like a gray veil, torn sometimes asunder as a more powerful gleam shot out from the blue flames and showed for a moment glimpses of gold backgrounds and saintly faces, carved frames, and beautiful old china, and a dim vision of floating angels painted on the ceiling above.

The little old lady herself was the fairest picture of all, and the firelight showed clearly her dainty lace cap fastened with flat silver pins, her silken dress, and the delicate foam of lace at her neck and wrists. She seemed to suit the great room exactly, although she was so small and so young in the midst of her old-world treasures. She really was one of those whom the gods love—who there-

fore never grow old. Her eyes were as keen and as bright as a child's, and when she laughed every one who heard her was obliged to laugh too. They might not know why they were laughing, but the very sound made their hearts gay and showed them a world full of happiness.

It was a festa to-day in the old palazzo, and there was to be a birthday feast. Three little visitors were expected, and their fairy godmother was sitting there in the firelight waiting for them. First they would eat their cake and fruit in the other salon, play their games and work off their boisterous spirits. Then would come the great excitement of the day. They would make their visit to the little old lady and find out what surprise she had planned for them.

The sounds of laughter and pattering feet could be heard through the folding doors, and the fairy godmother smiled as she listened. She loved children, and she liked to hear them noisy at a distance. Near at hand she preferred them to behave quietly and courteously. This room was her kingdom, and she ruled with a firm though kindly hand. All children knew that only their most courtly manners were expected here.

Now came a sound of talking and shuffling outside the door, and then followed a gentle knock.

"Come in!" cried the Queen, and the door opened and the guests came in.

Margaret, the eldest, led the way. She came a few steps forward and, standing well in front, dropped a curtsy, so low that her white muslin frock almost touched the floor. Then followed Christopher and John, who each in turn kissed the frail white hand held out to them.

Three little chairs, all in a row, were set out for the guests, and they sat down very quietly and answered, one at a time, politely and clearly, the questions put to them.

"How is your mother, Margaret?"

"She is very well, thank you, godmother."

"How old are you to-day?"

"I am nine years old, godmother."

"How old are you, Christopher?"

"Seven and a half, and I'm nearly as tall as Margaret."

"I hope you had a good tea, John?"

"Luv'ly!" said John, quite loud out, and not in a polite whisper at all. "I had three cakes an' four tarts an'"—here he caught Margaret's stern eye and stopped, but his godmother patted his hand and smiled on him. They all knew that John was the favourite.

But although the children tried to sit still and

answer politely, they could not help their eyes wandering towards a table which stood just behind. It was not an ordinary table, for it had a white cover over it, and there was something underneath the cover which made it look deliciously secret and exciting.

Then the little old lady blew a silver whistle, and immediately a tall serving-man came in, who lit the candles and moved the white-covered table in front of the fire.

The children drew their chairs nearer and held their breath with excitement.

"Now," said the fairy godmother, "as this is Margaret's birthday, she shall take the cloth off and choose first. Perhaps there is also something there for the unlucky people who have no birthdays to-day."

Christopher gave a sigh of satisfaction, and John's eyes shone.

"And so," went on the old lady, "I have set out a choice of presents for all of you. After Margaret has chosen, Christopher and John shall spin the teetotum to decide who is to have the next choice. Each present has a story, and after you have chosen you shall hear what the stories are."

There was a breathless pause. Margaret, with

cheeks flushed pink, and blue eyes shining like stars, lifted the white cloth, and all three children stood and gazed at the treasures beneath.

The fairy godmother's presents were always something rather like herself—very rare, very beautiful, and full of charm. It would be difficult to know what to choose. There was a silver box for sweetmeats, with lovely fat cupids chasing each other round the lid. There was a little gold heart-shaped locket, set with rows of tiny pearls like mermaids' tears, and a slender golden chain to match. There was a knitted silken purse clasped at the top with a heavy silver coin, on which was engraved a picture of S. Martin and the beggarman. And last of all there was a small ebony cross with a worn silver figure upon it.

"Oh! be quick, Margaret!" said Christopher, and he gave an impatient tug to her blue sash. John so far forgot his manners as to stretch out one slim silk-stockinged leg and give his sister a gentle kick.

But Margaret took no notice of either of them. She stood with hands clasped tightly together and gazed at the treasures.

"Well, my dear?" said the old lady at last.

"Please, may I have the locket?" said Margaret, almost in a whisper.

"I thought so," said the old lady, nodding and smiling as she stretched out a hand and fastened the slender chain round Margaret's soft neck, and patted her golden head.

"Now for the rest," she said.

There was a little bustle while the boys searched for the teetotum, and then a space on the table was cleared for the spinning. Christopher, being the elder, had the first turn, and he spun so vigorously that the teetotum bounded off the table and disappeared. This wasted a good deal of precious time, but at last it was found and Christopher tried again.

"Four!" he shouted at the very top of his voice, as the teetotum staggered and lay on its side. Margaret said "Hush!" and looked reprovingly at him. He knew quite well that he ought not to shout in that room; but Margaret looked so prim and proper, and so pleased with herself and the gold locket, that instead of looking sorry he made a face at her and felt happier.

John's hand was trembling with eagerness, and so hot that the teetotum stuck to his fingers and wouldn't spin at all to begin with. Then it whirled round and round rather feebly, and sank on its side showing the figure two.

"Ah!" said Christopher with a long-drawn

breath of satisfaction, "it's my turn to choose next."

The bonbon box was rather nice but not very useful. It wouldn't hold many sweets. It might do to keep worms in for fishing, but there were no air-holes, and the worms would die.

"I'll have the purse, please," he said, lifting S. Martin with care.

John had slipped his hand on to the old lady's knee and was holding her fingers tight. These two understood each other best of all, perhaps because their ages so nearly met—for he was at the beginning and she was near the end of the golden circle of years. He gave a great sigh as Christopher took up the purse.

"Was that what you wanted?" she whispered.

"No," whispered John back, "but I was so afraid he would choose my special want."

"Is it the silver box?" she asked, smiling.

"Oh no," said John out loud; "I want the little black cross."

"Now, John, that's very foolish," said Margaret in her most grown-up voice. "What would you do with it? Of course you must choose the bonbon box. You are too little to understand such things."

But the fairy godmother lifted the cross very

reverently and put it into John's hand. "John shall choose what he likes," she said, "and indeed he has chosen best of all. See how smooth the silver is. Loving fingers touching it reverently have worn away all the sharpness long ago. Many and many a prayer have God's angels carried up to Him while that silver was wearing so smooth. Many a story hangs around it, like perfume round a beautiful flower. The little black cross carries with it a wondrous blessing."

"But can we have my locket story first, please," said Margaret quickly, "because it is my birthday?"

The little old lady nodded, and sat back in her chair. She folded her hands, which looked like two pale white flowers against the dark folds of her silken gown, and then she began.

THE STORY OF MARGUERITE'S LOCKET.

Marguerite was only a very little girl, scarcely five years old, on the dark, sad day when they told her that God had taken her mother and the new little baby brother to the beautiful fields of Paradise. For a long time Marguerite felt sure her mother would come back again. She was so certain that mother could not be happy, even in the most beautiful place, while her little daughter was left behind.

But days, weeks, and months went past and no mother returned, and life grew rather dull and lonely for one little girl in the great gloomy old palazzo.

There were no flowers now in the rooms, and many of the shutters were kept closed, and the shadowy, silent salon had a grim, unfriendly look. Visitors came sometimes, but not very often, and most of them asked such foolish questions.

"Do you remember your mother, you poor little one?" they said; and then Marguerite drew herself up like the princess in the picture gallery and said, "I remember very well, thank you."

But, truth to tell, when Marguerite was seven years old her memory began to grow a little dim. Those happy days, full of sunshine and flowers, seemed such a long way off that she almost forgot what they had been like. She had no portrait of her mother, but in the picture gallery there hung an old faded altar-piece, where the sweet face of a Madonna looked out of a pale gold background, so like the gentle face which used to bend over her that she had long ago made up her mind that it was the portrait of her mother, with the golden light of heaven shining behind her.

As the memory of her sunny, tender-faced mother grew dim, the picture of the heavenly Mother grew

more and more real to Marguerite. The dear little curly-haired baby of the picture must be her little baby brother, she supposed, and whenever she was lonely or in trouble she crept away into the picture gallery, where the comforting sweet face was always ready to welcome her and make her forget that she was lonely.

Of course there was Brigida too, the old nurse, who was never tired of telling her tales about the fair young mistress she had loved so well.

"I held her in these arms when she was but a child like thee," Brigida often said. "She was the fairest flower on earth, so the good God took her to bloom in His garden above."

"I wish He hadn't," said Marguerite. "I wonder if she likes His garden best? She always loved flowers, didn't she, and that is why she called me Marguerite?"

"Si, si," said Brigida softly; "and canst thou remember what she told thee before she went away?"

Then Marguerite shut her eyes and knitted her brows, and tried to remember carefully every word.

"She said I must always remember to grow just like my name," she said slowly; "that I must have a golden heart like the daisies, with white, pure

thoughts like their petals, so that when I went to meet her she would know me at once, and say, 'Why, here is my little golden-hearted Marguerite!'"

Old Brigida nodded her head and tried to smile, although her eyes were dim with tears.

"May the holy angels guard thee as their white flower!" she said.

There was no one else who talked to Marguerite about her mother. Her grandfather never did. But then he scarcely spoke to her at all. She always felt that he exactly matched the old palazzo—he was so stately, and so terrifying, and so old; and yet he was home. If she belonged to no one else, she at least belonged to the old gloomy rooms and the white-haired, stately grandfather. Every day she went into his private room and made her curtsy to him and said, "I am very well, thank you, grandfather," when he looked up from under his bushy eyebrows and said, "Hey! Well? How are you to-day?"

But Marguerite was by no means always lonely and quiet. She could be as happy as the day is long, and could make a good deal of noise too, especially when her lessons were done and Mario, the youngest of Brigida's grandsons, was allowed to stay and play for a little with the Signorina, on

the days he came to see his Nonna in the great palazzo. He was a well-behaved, gentle little boy, and it was good for the child to have a companion of her own age to play with.

So the children had the happiest times together, and in all the games Marguerite was the princess and Mario her humble subject. All sorts of splendid adventures they went through, and had the most hairbreadth escapes in the Make-Believe Land where they played together.

Sometimes, too, they even had a game of hide-and-seek all over the palace, but that was only when they were quite certain that Marguerite's grandfather had gone out. Even then they were careful never to go near his room, for it was clearly understood that that was dangerous ground.

Now one day it happened that the dull old palazzo awoke to a feeling of excitement, and even Marguerite felt it in the air. There was to be a dinner party at night—not just an ordinary dinner party, but a very special one to welcome the Prince. When the servants mentioned the Prince they dropped their voices almost to a whisper. Marguerite was sure he must be a very great man indeed. Even grandfather left his room and gave orders in a deep, stern voice which seemed to frighten the maids out of their wits. Marguerite heard

The sweet face of the Madonna looked out of a pale
gold background.





them telling each other what a wonderful reception it was to be, and how the Signor had brought out the famous Venetian goblet to do honour to his guest. They spoke of the goblet even more reverently than they did of the Prince. It was priceless, they said, and there was not another like it in all the world, it was so beautiful and so precious.

Mario had come with a message that morning, but Brigida was much too busy to attend to him, and told the children they might play together a little, if they were quiet and did not trouble her.

It was a splendid opportunity for hide-and-seek, thought Marguerite, for every one was too busy to notice them, and Mario said he had met the Signor going out.

"I'll hide first," she said, and danced through the rooms trying to think of some new and secret place where Mario would never find her.

Then a happy thought struck her. Grandfather was out, and she would hide in his study. A delicious thrill of fear ran down her back as she pushed open the heavy door and peeped in. How grim it all looked, even though grandfather was not there! She would hide behind the curtain, and even if Mario dared to look in he would never find her.

There was not much light in the gloomy old room, but just as Marguerite tiptoed past the

table a little blue flame shot up from the smouldering logs on the hearth, and the light was reflected and caught by something that gleamed on the table. She stopped to look, and held her breath with delight. Why, here was the goblet, the wonderful goblet about which the servants had been talking! No wonder they spoke of it in awed whispers. She had never seen anything half so lovely before. It was like a bubble of gold and pansy colour and blue, with living light woven in—just as if some one had caught the end of a rainbow and rounded it into a fairy goblet.

Many a time when she and Mario blew bubbles in the nursery, she had touched the beautiful things with the tip of her finger, and found that they vanished at her touch. She wondered if this rainbow goblet would be as frail as the bubbles she blew. How thrilling it would be just to touch it with the tip of one finger and see! It was impossible to reach it from where she stood, but if she dragged a stool close to the table she could climb up and try.

The goblet stood in the very middle of the table, and Marguerite was obliged to lean over as far as possible, and even then it was just out of her reach. She tried to stretch a little farther: her foot slipped, the stool overbalanced, and she and the goblet

rolled over together on to the floor. She was quite whole and unbroken, but the goblet was smashed to pieces.

Marguerite lifted herself on to her knees and gazed in horror at the shining pieces. What would her grandfather say ? There was not another goblet like it in all the world, and now it was broken—and the Prince was coming to-night ! She twisted her hands together, and her eyes grew round and terrified. What was to be done ?

There was a sound of footsteps passing outside just then, and there seemed only one thing to do, and that was to run away and hide herself. She slipped out of the door and ran down the long passage, and never paused till she reached the nursery, and stood trembling in the shadow of the great cupboard.

It seemed to Marguerite that she had stood there for hours, listening with all her ears to catch any sound from without, before the silence was broken. Certainly now there was a stir, and the sound of feet hurrying to and fro, but no one came near her. Had her grandfather come home and found the broken goblet ? Was Mario still looking for her ?

“ Signorina ! Signorina ! ” at last came Brigida’s voice from outside, and the old nurse hurried in looking frightened and distressed.

"What is it?" said Marguerite, standing still in the shadow.

"A terrible thing has happened!" panted Brigida. "The goblet—the wonderful goblet—has been broken! The Signor has ordered every one to come to his study, and he sends me to fetch thee too. What hast thou been doing here?"

"Playing hide-and-seek with Mario," said Marguerite. Her face was white and her hands shook, but Brigida was too much troubled herself to notice anything.

"What evil chance sent him here to-day?" she said. "He will have it that he has never entered the Signor's room, but there is only his word for it."

"Do they think that Mario broke the goblet?" burst out Marguerite quickly.

Brigida nodded and gave a great sob. "By all that was unfortunate he was running through the great hall, and ran straight into the arms of the Signor as he was going to his room."

Marguerite gasped. This was getting worse and worse. She tried to hang back, but Brigida caught her hand and dragged her on the faster. All the household was gathered already in the Signor's room, she said, and awaited them.

For the second time that day Marguerite entered

the gloomy study, and her heart almost stopped beating as she looked around.

There stood her grandfather, towering over all the rest, the frown upon his face as black as any thunder-cloud, his tall thin figure drawn to its full height, his eyes gleaming with anger. Around him the servants stood in terrified groups, and in front of all a poor little woebegone figure with a white, frightened face, gazing at the broken pieces of rainbow-coloured glass that lay at his feet on the floor.

"Has any one been in this room since I left it this morning?" thundered forth her grandfather's voice.

"No, Signor! No, Signor!" came the murmured denial from all sides.

"But some one must have been here. I give him one more chance to confess."

Those keen eyes glanced round at the servants as if they would drag out the very secrets of their hearts, but no one answered. Marguerite tried to speak, but no sound would come. Her very knees shook with terror. Her grandfather's voice terrified her; she had never heard it sound like that before.

"Marguerite, do you know anything about this?" pointing to the broken pieces of glass.

38 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

"No, grandfather." Somehow the words seemed to come from a long, long way off, and Marguerite did not know her own voice.

"What is the name of that child?" said her grandfather then, pointing a long white finger at little Mario.

"It is Mario, the son of my daughter, Signor," said Brigida in trembling tones. "He is a very good boy, and he——"

"What does he do here in this house?" went on the stern voice.

"He came with a message," said Brigida. "He is a very good——"

"Silence!" said the old man angrily. "The child shall answer for himself. Did you enter this room this morning, boy?"

"No, Signor," and Mario lifted his head and looked up with round, frightened eyes.

"Did you put that stool by the table on purpose to reach the goblet?" went on the stern voice.

"No, Signor," Mario answered firmly, but he looked like a frightened little black rabbit caught in a trap.

"What were you doing in the great hall where I found you?"

Mario glanced round for a moment and caught Marguerite's eye. He looked imploringly at her.

If only the Signorina would speak for him, and explain that they were playing a game, and that he had been seeking for her ! But Marguerite never moved and never spoke, and Mario hung his head.

"Enough !" thundered the old man. "It only makes matters worse to add a lie to it. Take the child out of my sight," he said bitterly to Brigida. "I will see him again to-morrow and decide on the punishment."

There was a quick movement among the servants ; they were all anxious to escape as soon as possible. Brigida took Mario's hand and led him out, and Marguerite went out with the rest, and ran swiftly upstairs into the nursery again.

It was all like a bad dream, and she never forgot that long, wretched day. Brigida had taken Mario home, and none of the other servants came near the nursery. She was all alone with that terrible black thought which waited to seize her whichever way she turned : she had told a lie, and Mario was to be punished for it !

It was bad enough while the daylight lasted, but when the shadows began to creep in and it was time for bed, the black thought blotted out everything else in the world and held her tight.

Poor old Brigida had returned to look after her charge, her eyes swollen with weeping.

"It is terrible—terrible!" she kept repeating. "The goblet was worth a fortune; and I have never known Mario tell a lie before."

"W-w-what will they do to him?" asked Marguerite.

"Heaven only knows," sighed Brigida.

Marguerite turned her face to the wall, and pulled the bed-clothes as high over her head as possible.

"Thou hast not said thy prayers to-night," said Brigida.

Marguerite never moved, and after waiting a few minutes Brigida carried the lamp away and left her alone in the darkness.

Then Marguerite opened her eyes and sat up. She could not lie still with the black thought so close to her. What would they do to Mario? Perhaps they would put him in prison. Perhaps the gens d'armes were already on their way to take him. Of course she had not said her prayers. How could she? No white angels would be there to guard her bed that night. She was all alone in the blackness. She was afraid, and she wanted Brigida. No, it was her mother she wanted; and she slipped out of bed, and felt her way noiselessly across the room and through the passages to the picture gallery.

The moon was shining clearly, and one pale

silver shaft lit up the sweet face of the Madonna she loved.

“Mother!” said Marguerite with a sob, standing close under the picture.

But for the first time the gentle face seemed to have nothing to do with her. The eyes looked far away as if they did not know her.

Then it was that the most terrible thought of all came into Marguerite’s mind. Her mother would never know her again; for she was no longer the little daughter that was to grow like a daisy, with a golden heart and pure white thoughts. Her heart was no longer gold. She had told a lie to save herself. Her black thoughts had frightened away even the angels from her bedside.

This was indeed more than she could bear. She stood shivering for a moment, looking up at the picture, and then turned and pattered with bare feet across the floor and down the staircase and into the hall. Outside the dining-room doors she stood still for a moment, and pressed her hands tightly together. Would she ever be brave enough to open the door and go in?

On the other side of those folding doors a blaze of many candles lit up the dinner table, and the men who sat round it were all talking gaily together. Marguerite’s grandfather, looking less grim

than usual, was lifting a goblet to pour the wine into the Prince's glass.

"Your Highness," he said, "I had hoped to pour your wine from a more fitting goblet—the great treasure of our house—but alas! only this morning it was broken into a thousand pieces."

The Prince looked up with interest.

"Not the famous Grimani goblet?" he exclaimed anxiously. "That is indeed a misfortune. I had hoped to see it. May I ask how it happened?"

Silence fell on all the guests, and they bent forward to listen to the story. So intent were they that none of them noticed when the tall doors opened slowly and a little white ghost came into the room.

Marguerite had quite forgotten all about the dinner party and the Prince, and now she was so dazzled by the light that she could not turn and run away. She gave a half-strangled sob, which made her grandfather start and look round. There stood his granddaughter in her night-gown, with tangled curls and bare feet.

Surely he had been tried enough for one day! His most treasured possession had been destroyed, and now his royal guest must indeed think it an ill-ordered household, where such a thing as this could happen!

"Marguerite!" he said in a cold, stern voice. "What are you doing here? Go to bed at once!"

"Grandfather," she said, "I came to tell you——"

But her grandfather's stern gaze made her falter, and she saw him raise his hand to ring the bell.

She looked wildly round. Was there no one to help her? Was she going to fail again, and go back to those black thoughts?

Then suddenly some one rose from the table and came towards her, and she was lifted in a pair of strong arms, and the very kindest face she had ever seen bent over her, and the most comforting voice whispered, "Come and tell me all about it."

He carried her to the table under the blaze of the lighted candles, and she turned and hid her face against his coat. The earth had suddenly ceased to rock, and she felt safe; the blackness had gone, and there was nothing but blueness now. The merriest blue eyes looked down at her, and her cheek was pressed tight against a beautiful blue ribbon, and a wonderful star shone with a blue light upon his breast.

"Tell me all about it," said the kind voice again.

"I wanted just to touch it because it was so beautiful," she sobbed. "Then I slipped, and it was broken all in pieces. Then I told a lie;

44 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

and they will take Mario to prison, and mother will never know me again, because I have a black heart instead of a gold one ! ”

“ So you came to confess. That’s a brave little maid,” said the kind voice.

There was a murmur of other voices now, but Marguerite only looked at the blue ribbon, and pressed her cheek tightly against the glittering star. Then she heard her grandfather’s voice bidding her go back to bed now, and they would say no more about it, since she had confessed and was sorry.

“ So that’s all right,” said the kind voice in her ear ; and then she was lifted up in the strong arms again, and carried out of the room and up the stairs and back to her little white bed. Brigida had come to show the way, but she stood at a distance with respectful bowed head as the kind man bent over and talked to her.

It was so easy to tell him everything, because he seemed at once to understand. He was quite sure grandfather would forgive her, and that the Prince would not be angry because she had come to the party in her night-gown. He understood, too, all about how anxious she was to grow like her name, and he was quite sure that the angels would come back now to guard her bed.

So Marguerite turned round with a sigh, and went to sleep with a hand under her cheek, dreaming of blue skies, and shining stars, and fields of golden-hearted daisies.

And not many days afterwards a little wooden box arrived at the palace addressed to Marguerite. And when she opened it she found another box with a golden crown upon it, and inside that, on a soft bed of cotton wool, there lay a locket made of gold, in the shape of a heart, set round with tiny white pearls. There was a paper, too, inside the box, and on it was written—

“ To Marguerite, to remind her of the golden heart, and the tears that washed it clean again.”

* * * * *

The little old lady's voice ceased, and no one spoke for a moment. Then Margaret touched the locket reverently.

“ I am glad I chose it,” she said.

“ It was rather plucky of her to tell before all those people,” said Christopher.

John had his arm round the little old lady's neck and was whispering into her ear.

“ Did you know he was the Prince ? ” he asked.

“ Not till long afterwards,” she whispered back.

TONINO'S CRUCIFIX.

"PLEASE, may we have my story now?" said John, and he laid the crucifix in the little old lady's hand and pressed closer to her side.

"It's really my turn first," said Christopher, "and I expect my story about the man on horse-back will be a jolly lot more interesting, but you can have yours first if you like."

"That's right," said the little old lady. "The person who possesses S. Martin's purse should learn to be generous. John shall have his story first. The crucifix is very old, but the story is quite new and has nothing to do with the legends of long-ago days. So now sit quietly on your chairs and I will tell you the story of Tonino's Crucifix."

In the great hotels of the city, which in the season are crowded with visitors, there are always a great many waiters kept busy all through the winter and spring months. But when the great heat comes it drives away the strangers, and the

hotels grow empty, and many waiters are dismissed for the summer to find what work they may.

Angelo always dreaded those summer months. He was a good waiter, but work was scarce, and it was almost impossible to make money enough during those three long months to feed his wife and Tonino. Everything they could sell was sold by degrees, and yet they were often obliged to go hungry. True they did not want to eat much in those hot days when the sky was like brass and the pavements burned the feet, and even the night brought no breath of coolness into the narrow city streets; but one must eat to live. So it was a happy day indeed when the time came round to return to the hotel, and put on once more a shining black suit of clothes, and smell the good smell of coffee and cooking, and forget what it felt like to be empty and hungry. At first Angelo's coat hung upon him as if it was quite two sizes too large.

"He looks as thin as a crow," said the old lady upon whom he waited.

But he was a very cheerful crow, and he knew that the coat would be quite tight before the summer came round again. The old lady was fond of cheerful faces, and she often stopped to

48 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

talk to Angelo, and by-and-by she heard all about his wife and little Tonino.

"You may bring the child to see me some day," she said; and Angelo was indeed a proud man when a week later he knocked at the door and asked if it was permitted to Tonino to enter and salute the gracious Signora.

Tonino, with his black bullet head and bright eyes, looked so exactly a smaller edition of his father that the old lady smiled and called him "a queer little crow," but as she spoke in English it did not matter. The queer little crow looked at her with solemn, round eyes, and then, urged on behind by his father, he came forward and lifted her hand to kiss it, whispering a low "Complimenti, Signora!"

"He is much too thin," said the old lady briskly. "How old is he, Angelo?"

"He has but five years, Signora," said Angelo, watching her anxiously, eager to please.

"Tuts! he looks more like three," she said. "You must feed him up."

That would be an easy matter now, beamed Angelo. He was earning good wages, and the bambino would soon grow fat.

Meanwhile Tonino's black eyes were gazing in wonder at the pictures and all the wonderful

things in the room. Then he pointed suddenly to a little crucifix which hung on the wall close by, and said something quickly to his father.

"What does he say?" asked the old lady.

"He asks if it is a wonder-working crucifix," said Angelo, smiling. "He is thinking of the Crucifix of La Providenza, which works still such miracles."

"I wonder!" said the old lady, and she looked reverently at the worn silver figure. Then she drew Tonino closer, and put a kindly hand upon his round, black head.

"The dear Lord can always work miracles," she said. "The little cross must always remind us of that."

Tonino nodded with great satisfaction; but just then a large slice of English plum cake and a picture book were placed before him, and he had no eyes for anything else. Very soon he carried his treasures off, as happy as a king.

It was some weeks later that the old lady noticed that Angelo no longer looked so beamingly happy. She even caught him once or twice with a troubled, anxious look on his face.

"Come, out with it," she said suddenly. "Something is wrong. What is the matter?"

Angelo looked very much ashamed of himself.

as if he had been caught doing something wrong ; but at last he managed to explain apologetically that he had not meant to vex the Signora with sad looks, but the bambino was ill, and they had carried him to the hospital, and the boy was fit to break his heart with grief because of being parted from his mother.

“Tuts !” said the old lady ; “children’s hearts don’t break so easily. He will soon be all right. But I am sorry for your wife, poor thing. Tell her to call in to-morrow, after she has been to the hospital, and let me know if there is anything I can send to the child.”

Angelo thanked her, and there was a misty look in his eyes. Tears of gratitude filled them readily when any one was good to his little son.

“Well, and how’s the boy ?” asked the old lady next day when Angelo’s wife, Maria, stood curtsying inside the door.

“He is not very well,” said his mother ; and then she went on to tell how terribly homesick he was in his little white bed in the middle of the great strange hospital ward. The sisters were very good to him, but he wanted his mother. All day long he was fairly contented, but when night came his one cry was for her, and his pillow was wet with tears as he sobbed himself to sleep.

"O Signora!"—she ended up her tale with a sob—"the doctors to-day say that they fear he may die!"

"Come, come," said the old lady, "you must not be so down-hearted. A child so quickly becomes ill, but as quickly grows well again. And they will take good care of him at the hospital."

"Yes, yes," said the mother, "but it is so hard to leave him there when the child cries and cries and holds out his arms to me!"

"But you must remember it is for his good," said the old lady. "Come, cheer up and tell me if there is anything I can send to please and amuse him."

The poor woman stood twisting a corner of her coarse blue apron with hands that trembled. Would the Signora think her overbold?—would she be asking too great a favour?—but the little one talked constantly of a little crucifix he had seen here, and he thought it would make him well if he had it. Perhaps the Signora would lend it for a few days?

The old lady lifted the crucifix down and laid it in Maria's toil-worn hand.

"Of course he shall have it, bless him!" she said, and she slipped something shining as well into her outstretched hand

That night Maria lingered as long as she dared beside the little bed in the hospital. Tonino had been pleased when she brought the crucifix, and she had hung it above his bed where he could see it, and for a while he was quite contented and happy ; but as evening came on and his mother prepared to go, the old fear and loneliness seized him again.

"There, there," said his mother, unclasping his little hot fingers and freeing her hand, "I will come back early, and the night will soon pass."

"But I am so lonely when thou art gone," sobbed Tonino. "I am so frightened when I wake and cannot feel thy hand."

The poor mother tried to speak cheerfully and call up a smile. She could not bear to leave him, but rules were rules, and it was time to go. She looked back and saw him watching her with eyes full of tearful longing, and she hurried on that she might not hear the sound of his pitiful cries.

She was early at the hospital gates next day, but before she entered the ward a sister stopped her.

"It was as we feared," she said gently—"he passed away in the night."

The poor woman uttered a cry and hid her face in her hands.

"He was lonely and frightened, and wanted me, and I was not there !" she cried.

"No, no," said the sister, "take comfort ! He was neither lonely nor frightened, but quite happy. He did not even need thee. We found him curled up as if asleep, with the happiest smile upon his lips and not a trace of tears upon his cheek. He must have stretched up and taken down the crucifix above his bed, for he held it lovingly cuddled close to his cheek, one hand clasping it fast ; and the look on his face was of perfect happiness and content. It was as if the dear Lord Himself had stooped down to comfort the little one before the angels bore him home."

* * * * *

There was silence in the room as the little old lady finished the story, and the firelight caught the glint of two tears that had fallen on the worn silver figure.

"I thought it would work a miracle and make him well," said Christopher in a vexed voice.

"Miracles don't happen now," said Margaret reprovingly.

"I think they do," said John slowly. "It was only a little old crucifix, and yet it took away all the loneliness and frightenedness, and made him as happy as if his mother had been there."

S. MARTIN'S PURSE.

"IT is my turn at last. Can I have my story now, please?" said Christopher, as he laid the purse on the little old lady's knee and watched her anxiously. He was so very much afraid that she might have forgotten his story, or be too tired to tell it.

But the fairy godmother nodded her head briskly, and a smile broke over her face as she lifted the purse in her hand and looked at it carefully.

"The world is full of wonderful things," she said—"too wonderful for an old woman who belongs to the past. There are the motor cars that run about the streets as fast as trains, there are the messages carried through the air without wires, the pictures that move as if they were alive, and hosts of other marvels. But, oh dear me! I have my own private share of magic wonders too, so I need not grumble."

"Is it a magic purse?" asked Christopher breathlessly.

"Not exactly," said the little old lady, "and

yet, as I take it in my hand, it suddenly carries me back over eighty long years faster than any motor car could run. It whispers messages more clearly than any wireless telegraphy could do, and it shows me real living pictures which need no magic lantern. I will tell you your story, Christopher, while the magic works."

There was a pause, and the little old lady sat there smiling with a far-away look in her eyes, until Christopher grew impatient.

"What are you seeing, godmother?" he asked.

"Hush!" she said; "wait one moment until the picture grows clearer. It takes some time to see through the mists of eighty years. Ah! now I see it quite distinctly, and I can hear the voices too."

There were always many voices to be heard in the old house at the corner of the piazza, for it was a house full of children—some big, some middle sized, and some quite little ones. Teresa, the old nurse, often declared that she was quite deafened by the noise they made; and then she looked at Martin reproachfully. For it was Martin who led the others in their noisy games, and it was always Martin's voice which sounded above all the rest. He was so very fond of giving orders and getting his own way. Francesca and Lucia

might grumble, but they always gave in ; while as to Giovanino, who was only five, he was Martin's adoring shadow.

"I shall be a soldier, like my godfather, some day," said Martin, "so I ought to give the orders, and you ought to obey."

But there was one thing that sorely tried Martin's pride and helped to keep him humble. He had to wear his cousin's old clothes. The clothes were not really old at all, for this cousin was an only child, whose parents bought him more costly things than he could ever wear out ; so when he grew tired of a suit it was packed up and sent off to Martin, who had so many little brothers and sisters to be clothed. The worst of it was that the cousin was not at all soldierly, and wore the kind of clothes which Martin hated. Indeed, sometimes he could have wept, if he hadn't been nine years old, when he was obliged to wear velvet tunics and embroidered vests with silver buttons, and—worst of all—a green cloth coat scalloped all round the edge and trimmed with a lace collar !

However, on the afternoon when this story begins Martin was much too excited and happy to think about clothes, for his soldier godfather was coming to pay them a visit, and it was

always a special festa when he came. All the children loved him, and he brought presents for them all; but he was Martin's special property, and they always had a private conversation together. Then, if he was satisfied with his godson's behaviour, he would add another good-conduct stripe to the one which Martin already wore so proudly, sewn on his sleeve, to the great admiration of his sisters and their little guest Marguerite, who was paying them a visit just then.

Marguerite thought there was no one so clever and splendid as Martin; but she was not accustomed to boys, and she sometimes grew terrified of all the noise and the wild games which Martin loved.

"We shall play bears while we are waiting," he said decidedly that afternoon, and Marguerite felt a cold shiver run down her back.

It meant creeping into dark hiding-places, while Martin, as bear, prowled about stealthily and chased his prey with relentless ferocity, giving vent to the most terrible growling noises.

Lucia and Francesca shrieked with joyful excitement as they were chased up the stairs to the tower and disappeared into the lumber room, while Giovanino squeezed his fat little person under his bed; but Marguerite was too bewildered and ter-

rified to seek any such refuge. She ran first one way and then another like a frightened chicken, and at last tried to hide herself behind the heavy window curtain. But the curtain did not reach the ground, and the most short-sighted of bears could not have helped seeing two ankles and a pair of bronze slippers which were exposed to view. The growling came nearer and nearer, while Marguerite trembled and held her breath, and at last gave a wild scream as she felt her ankles seized.

"Don't make so much noise!" said Martin, giving her an impatient shake while he dragged her out from behind the curtain. "You'll bring Teresa in if you scream like that."

Marguerite was silent at once, but she looked at him with such round, frightened eyes that Martin really felt quite a successful bear, and was just going to grow more ferocious than ever when the door opened and Teresa came in.

"Leave the little Signorina alone," she said. "Thou dost frighten her with thy rough games. Call the others and tell them to come and be dressed, for word has come that the Signora awaits thee in the salon."

In a short time the children were all dressed—the little girls in clean muslin frocks, and Giovanino

in his best doublet; but sounds of a storm came from Martin's room. He was ready too, all but his coat, and that he refused to put on in spite of all Teresa's coaxing. If there was one thing in all the world which Martin hated it was that green scalloped coat with the lace collar.

"I will not put it on!" he said. "I'd far rather wear sackcloth and ashes. If those old Bible people and the saints thought that sackcloth and ashes was the most wretched thing to wear, I should like to know how they would have felt if they'd been obliged to wear fancy green coats and lace collars!"

"Do not think about it, poverino," coaxed Teresa. "Be good and slip it on."

"I will not!" cried Martin, stamping his foot. "I will not see my godfather in that coat. He will laugh and think I am a puppet. How could a good-conduct stripe be sewn on a coat like that?"

"There will be no good-conduct badge for thee if thou art disobedient," said Teresa calmly.

"Oh, be quick, Martin!" said Francesca through the open door. "Never mind about your coat. We mustn't keep mother waiting."

"I will not wear that coat," said Martin obstinately.

"Va bene! then thou shalt go to bed," said Teresa.

"You will get no present," said Lucia, "and mother will be so vexed with you."

"O Martin, do come!" urged Marguerite.

But Martin only turned his back on them and walked over to the window, whistling carelessly, as if he did not care at all.

"Come," said Teresa to the others, "leave him to himself;" and she went out and shut the door.

Martin climbed up on to the window seat and opened the window. Of course it was rather a grand and manly thing that he had done, but the thought of the others going down to greet his godfather, while he was left behind, was almost more than he could bear. The salon was just below his window, and opened on to the hanging garden which was built above the stables, so if he leaned out he could hear the voices below; and once he caught sight of his godfather as he strolled out to turn on the fountain, with Giovanino clinging to his hand. Even the babies were down there; only he was left out.

The sun was setting now, and the sky was all rose-pink, and by-and-by a great cloud of birds came fluttering home to their safe shelter in the trees.

"The birds are singing their vespers," Teresa used to say when the sound of their twittering voices came from the garden beneath, and the children always hushed their voices to listen; but to-night Martin only wished crossly that they would not make so much noise and seem so happy. Presently the darkness began to fall swiftly like a soft, dark curtain drawn over the world, pricked here and there with pin-point holes to show the silver light beyond; but still he sat gazing out, watching the glow-worms round the fountain as they breathed themselves into tiny lamps and then disappeared again.

He must have been sitting there a long time, and the longer he sat the more unhappy and ill-used he felt. No one missed him or sent for him, no one cared what became of him. Now he could hear a carriage driving out of the courtyard, and he knew that his godfather had gone.

A very small knock sounded on the door. Martin said "Avanti!" very gruffly, and Marguerite looked in.

"Martin," she said, "do be good, for Teresa is coming, and I have saved up my present for you."

"I don't want any presents," said Martin angrily. "Go away!"

Then, as he saw the frightened look come into her eyes, he added grimly,—

“And mind you look out at eight o’clock for Renard the Fox. He will be under your bed, and he will heave it up and down, and then he’ll come stealing out and gnaw off your toes.”

That was more than Marguerite could bear. She dropped the thing she had been holding out in her hand, and turned to flee.

But Teresa was standing behind her and barred the way.

“Cattivo!” she said sternly to Martin. “So thou wilt come out to frighten the Signorina when she is in bed. We will take care of that and lock the fox up in his den.”

Here she shut the door and turned the key in the lock outside.

Martin raged up and down in helpless fury, and then threw himself on his bed and thumped the pillow with his fists; but that didn’t make him feel much better. The moon was shining through the window now, and presently it showed him something bright lying by the door where Marguerite had stood. He snatched it up and carried it to the window to examine it more carefully. It was a purse made of green knitted silk, and the fastening at the top was a beautiful old

silver coin with figures embossed upon it. This was the present which Marguerite had brought for him, and which he had so ungraciously refused. He looked at the figures on the coin more closely. There was a man on horseback cutting his cloak in two with a sword, and another man was kneeling close by. Why, of course it was S. Martin's coin, and it was the picture of the soldier saint dividing his cloak with the beggar man. It was then that a splendid idea came into Martin's head.

The soldier saint, his namesake, had shared his cloak with a beggar and gained great renown. He, too, would act a saint and soldier's part. That scalloped coat was hanging on the back of the chair where Teresa had left it. He would put it on and go out to find some poor beggar and share it with him. Of course the door was locked, but that only made it the more exciting. He had often longed to try the plan of the painter monk who had escaped from the Pitti Palace by making a rope of his sheets and climbing down to the street. It was not a long drop to the garden below, and once there he could slip through the salon and so down the great staircase and out through the courtyard.

It was no easy matter to tie those sheets quite

firmly together, but it was done at last, and one end was securely fastened to the iron bar which guarded the window. Then very carefully and cautiously Martin began the descent.

It made him feel a little giddy at first, for the sheet rope swung from side to side, and he grazed his knuckles against the wall; but he went steadily lower and lower until he reached the end of the rope.

What was to be done now? He kicked his legs out wildly, in order to discover exactly where he was and how far off the ground he was hanging; but there was nothing to guide him, and below all looked most dark and dangerous. For a moment he held his breath, and a cold fear gripped him; but he had soldier blood in his veins, and he set his teeth and determined to go on and not be afraid. Besides, his arms were getting too tired to hold on much longer; so he stretched down as far as he could, and then let go and dropped.

It was rather a long drop, but luckily he went thud into the soft earth of a flower-bed; and though the verbena and heliotrope were bruised and broken beneath him, his bones were quite safe. At first he lay half stunned, and then he sat up and tenderly felt himself all over to see if he had

gone to pieces. There were a few scratches on his legs and some rather painful bruises, and ugly tears in his clothes, but of course the coat was untouched. A coat like that never came to harm !

No one was in the salon, and no one saw a little ghostlike figure softly open the long French windows and steal through the dim room and down the great staircase ; but the real danger was still to be faced. Rafaello, the tall portiere, kept guard at the door of the courtyard, and it would be difficult to slip past him unnoticed if he was still there.

Martin peered down, and his heart sank as he saw the tall figure in blue livery standing solemnly at the gate. There was nothing to do but to wait, so he crept farther into the shadow and kept a keen watch, like a very small mouse watching a very big cat.

Presently Rafaello yawned and sat down on his rush-bottomed chair and took a folded newspaper out of his pocket. This was more promising, and, better still, as he read his head began to nod, and Martin determined to make a dash for it. Very noiselessly he crept nearer and nearer, and then with a swift dive he passed the gate and was out on to the pavement.

There was a bewildered shout from Rafaello, but he was too late. Martin was round the corner

like a flash of lightning, and the darkness of the little narrow street swallowed him up completely. Never in all his life had he enjoyed himself more. He almost forgot he was out on a saint's errand. It was so exciting to be quite alone and free to go wherever he liked in the dark streets that looked so alluring and mysterious, with here and there a little lighted shop to add to their fascination.

It was a pity that he had no money in his pockets. The smell of roast chestnuts which came from the barrow at the street corner was very appetizing, and the chestnuts themselves looked deliciously warm and snug in their beds when the man turned back the old blanket that covered them for a moment while he shovelled in a fresh supply. The large pale slabs of polenta looked good too; and Martin had had no supper, and was decidedly hungry. Several little ragged boys joined him as he stood gazing into the open cookshop, and immediately held out their hands.

"Soldino, Signorino!" they chanted as usual.

The sight of them suddenly reminded Martin of his errand, which he had almost forgotten.

"I have no soldi," he said to the smallest and most ragged of the boys; "but if you will come with me I will give you something else."

The other boys eagerly pressed forward too, but

Martin waved them back. He only wanted one beggar boy, and not a crowd; so he walked on until the others followed no longer, and then he stopped by a doorway and looked solemnly at the boy.

"Would you like a nice warm coat?" he asked.

"But the winter is passed," said the boy. "I would rather have a soldino to buy polenta."

Martin frowned. This was most annoying, and not at all like S. Martin's grateful beggar. It was very tiresome of him not to want a coat.

"I have told you I have no soldi," he said briefly, "but I will share my coat with you." And he pulled his knife out of his pocket and began to take off the green coat.

It was delightful to think of ripping that coat right up the back, beginning at one of the scallops and ending at the neck. Of course a knife was not as dignified as a sword, but it was better than nothing.

"Hold it tight while I cut," he said as he held out one side to the boy and grasped the other firmly in his left hand.

The small beggar looked on in wild amazement. The Signorino must be quite mad to spoil a handsome coat like that! It was worth a handful of

soldi, but it would be quite worthless if it was cut up.

“Ma ché!” he shouted as the knife began to saw its way up, and he suddenly jerked the coat out of Martin’s hand and made off with it as fast as his legs could carry him.

Martin quite forgot that he was acting the part of a saint, and, hot with indignation, immediately gave chase. Straight down the narrow street he ran and out into the Via Tornabuoni with its lighted shops, and almost before he knew what he was doing he had charged into a group of officers, in their long blue cloaks, who were standing chatting outside a restaurant there.

“What in the name of fortune are you doing here without a coat?” asked an astonished voice which Martin knew only too well. And there stood his godfather looking at him in blank amazement!

Martin wished with all his heart that the ground would open and swallow him up; but the ground remained firm beneath his feet, and there was no escape. He hung his head, while the officers began to laugh and joke about his appearance, and to ask him if it was his full-dress uniform.

“It’s a case of desertion, I’m afraid,” said his

godfather. "I must put him under arrest and march him back to barracks."

It was on the way home that Martin managed to explain in a rather stammering fashion how he came to be running about the streets without a coat. Somehow it did not sound a very splendid deed now, and he cast a good deal of the responsibility on S. Martin, while he looked up hopefully for a sign of sympathy on his godfather's face.

But there was no sympathy there. Martin had never seen him look so stern or heard him speak so gravely.

"I am disappointed in you, Martin," he said. "A soldier's first duty is obedience. You will never make a soldier if you try to escape from disagreeable duties and make pious excuses for getting your own way. To give away what you don't want, and which costs you nothing, is not self-denial. And have you forgotten the end of the story of S. Martin's cloak? Did you look forward to seeing that coat of yours again in any heavenly vision?"

It was a very miserable Martin who was handed over to Teresa to be put to bed, for he knew now that he had forfeited all his stripes, and perhaps he would never get another. He watched her silently

as she pulled in the sheet rope, muttering to herself and thanking the saints that he had not broken every bone in his body, as he thoroughly deserved to do. He was still waiting dejectedly until his bed should be ready, when the clock struck eight, and a little white ghost crept into his room and stood by his side.

"Martin," it said, "I've come to say good-night, and you can keep the purse for your very own. Only please don't let the fox come to-night!"

"All right," said Martin gruffly. It certainly was not a very soldierly or brave thing to frighten a little girl, and he seemed to hear his godfather say again, "You will never make a soldier."

* * * * *

The little old lady's voice ceased, but she still had that far-away look in her eyes, and John ventured to whisper softly,—

"Are you seeing any more pictures, god-mother?"

"Yes," said the little old lady—"yes, I see S. Martin's purse once more, but it is a sad picture this time. Outside in the streets the soldiers are marching past, and the Hymn of Garibaldi comes floating through the open window, drowned every now and then by cheer after cheer which bursts

from the waiting crowds—cheers that tell of a great battle won for freedom and for Italy. But in the room on a low bed lies a soldier wounded unto death. A girl is kneeling by his side, and she holds in her hand the old green purse and listens to the few whispered words he tries to speak.

“‘I have always kept it, Marguerite. It has helped me to remember how to be a true soldier. Do you remember that night? How the rope swings! Shall I ever be able to drop safely into the garden? I shall never make a soldier, he says, because I only gave away what cost me nothing; and what would I feel like if I saw that horrid little green coat in a heavenly vision?’

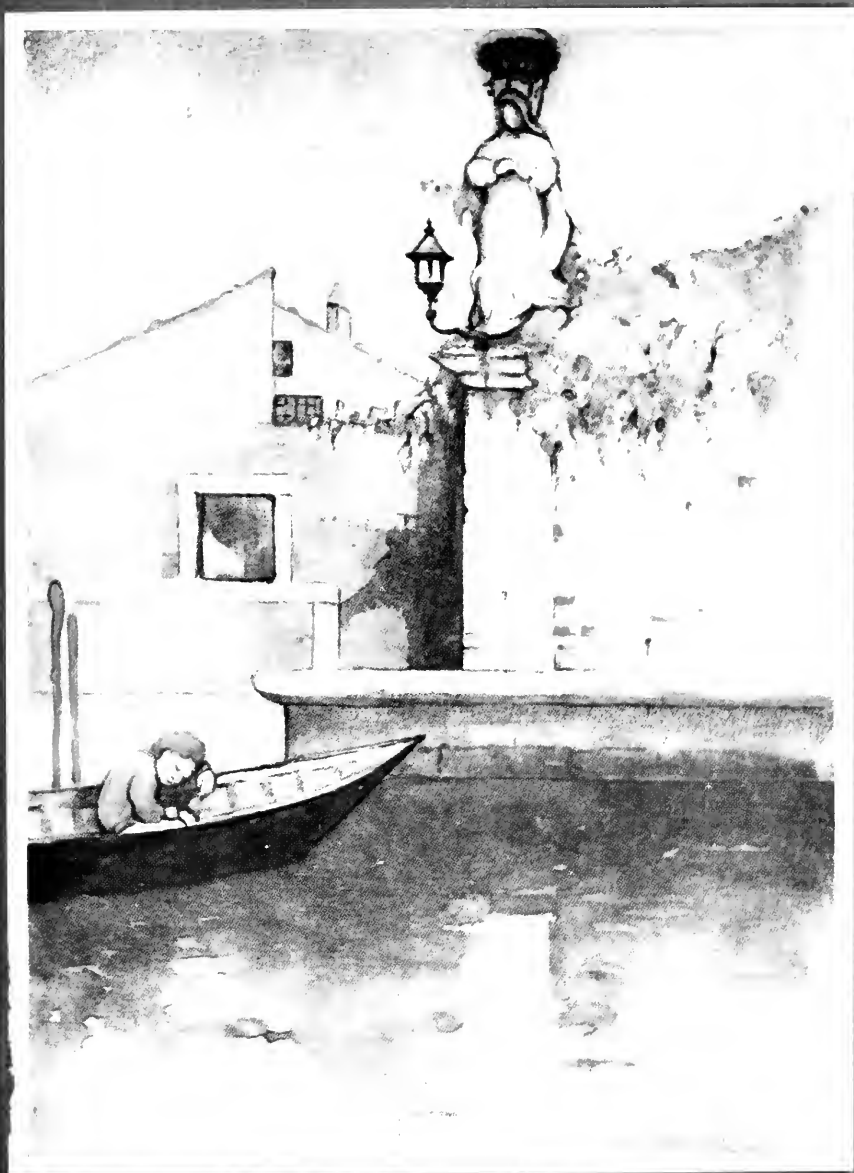
“‘It’s all right, Martin,’ the girl says. ‘You are as brave a soldier as S. Martin himself. You have given what costs you more than all the world beside, and you will find it again, not in a heavenly vision, but in Paradise itself.’”

HEARTSEASE.

THE Madonna looked down from her marble pedestal at the corner of the grim old palace. Silent and serene she stood, the whiteness of her folded robe shining out against the blue sky above and reflected in the green water beneath. She no longer seemed to trouble herself with the trials and temptations of her poor children who toiled for their daily bread in the narrow calles or out on the wide lagunes. The days had surely gone past since she stood to the people as the symbol of hope and help—the happy days when a miracle might happen at any time, when the Madonna would stoop down and with her gracious hand lift a burden from some tired shoulder, or send a heavenly messenger to do her work of healing and comfort.

There was a small black boat tied up at the side of the canal under the shadow of the Madonna, and in it a ragged little fisher boy sat gazing up at the statue, while the boat rocked idly to and fro. All sorts of difficult questions puzzled him

The Madonna looked down from her marble pedestal.



as he gazed with solemn round eyes at the white figure up there against the blue sky, set on her white marble pedestal festooned with the delicate mauve of the trailing wistaria. He knew, of course, it was a statue of the Madonna, the Queen of Heaven; and he knew, too, many an old tale of her marvellous power and the miracles she had wrought to help the poor and needy and those who had no other helper. He wondered why she no longer cared for her children—why there was no help in these days for the helpless, and why so many things in the world seemed all wrong. No one cared if he went hungry; no one noticed how tired his mother looked, as she tried to work and look after the wailing baby at the same time. His grandmother was too old and feeble to carry such heavy burdens, but who was to carry them for her? The neighbours around were as poor as themselves, and there was no one to look to for help. What a pity it was that even the Madonna had forgotten the poor tired ones of the earth! For the moment it was pleasant to sit there in the shade and watch the Madonna overhead; but soon the tide would turn, and then there would be no more idle dreaming, for he would have to be off ere the fishing boats set sail and try once more to earn a few soldi out on the lagunes.

The boat rocked as the steamers troubled the waters of the Grand Canal outside, and the little waves lapped against its side with a crooning rhythm. The sunbeams, dancing through the pale yellow leaves and mauve blossoms overhead, warmed the white marble with their amber glow. It was all very pleasant and soothing, and gradually the black, angry thoughts faded from Marco's mind and his eyelids began to droop. After all, what was the use of being angry, even if the Madonna had ceased to care, if angels never visited the earth, and all the saints were dead and gone?

"Marco," said a gentle voice in his ear; and Marco looked up. Somehow it did not surprise him at all to see a tall, gracious lady bending over him, or to feel her touch upon his shoulder and see her hand held out towards him. He was sure he had seen her face before somewhere, but the beauty and graciousness of her look kept him tongue-tied.

"Come," she said, and before he knew what he was doing his hand was in hers, and she was leading him up the steps, on to the shining white pavement.

On and on they went together, in and out the narrow calles; and Marco still said never a word, but pressed close to her side, willing to go wherever she should lead. It was not long before they

came to an old courtyard, and here they entered and stopped for a moment to rest.

There was a well in the middle of the courtyard, round which the pigeons fluttered, and an old woman stood leaning at its side. She had stopped to rest for a moment before she stooped to lift the heavy copper water-pot which she had just filled with the cool, sparkling water from the well below. She was a very feeble old woman, and her trembling hands were worn and scarred with work ; but she had a smile on her face which had wiped out all trace of weariness, and made it shine with peaceful content.

“The Madonna be praised that I still have strength to draw the water from her well!” she said.

“What is it that thou dost see?” asked the gentle voice in Marco’s ear.

“A poor old woman, too old and feeble to carry her burden,” said Marco.

“Look again,” said the voice.

Marco looked, and now he saw another figure standing there. Was it an angel, he wondered—that strong, straight, shining figure that held the handle of the water-pot and eased its weight from the feeble hands of the old woman?

“My heavenly messengers still come to lift the

burden from off the weary shoulders of my toiling children," said the voice. "Foolish people say no help is sent, but that is because they do not know the Angel of the Thankful Spirit."

Marco looked down with eyes ashamed.

"Come," said the voice again, and this time they stopped at the door of a poor tumble-down house where a young mother sat rocking her baby. She was crying softly as she wrapped a little black shawl round the child and tried to hush it to sleep. The neighbours, looking on with pitying eyes, said to one another, "Poor thing! Who is to help her now with her fatherless little one?"

They did not see what Marco saw. His beautiful lady had left him, and was bending over the poor mother, whispering in her ear and laying a hand in blessing upon the baby's downy head.

"I was once a poor mother like thee," she said. "I held my Baby close in poverty and danger. I know so well the pain of thy heart. And because of my Baby all babies are precious to me. Have faith and courage, and believe that help will come."

The young mother dried her eyes and smiled down upon the sleeping child. The thought had come into her mind how that the dear Lord had been once a little helpless bambino, and surely He would not forget. He who had fed the five

thousand — who cared even for the sparrows — would not fail to provide food for this little one. Suddenly her heart felt light and hopeful again. There was Some One who cared.

“Come,” said the voice in Marco’s ear, and he felt the strong hand leading him on once more.

“What dost thou see here?” asked the voice as they turned into the garden of a hospital where a nurse was slowly pacing along the sunny walk.

“I only see a woman,” said Marco. He was puzzled. There was nothing remarkable about her. He wondered why they had stopped to gaze at her.

“Look again,” said the voice, “and look carefully, for it is one of God’s saints who walks here.”

Marco looked intently, but he saw only a hospital nurse in a clean blue frock and snowy cap. She was neither beautiful nor stately, and there was certainly no halo round her head. Only her eyes looked kind, and there was a calm, peaceful air about her.

“Look then at the path where her footsteps have just passed,” said the voice.

Marco looked, and there, where her foot had pressed, little tender pansies had sprung up—the flowers that people call Heartsease.

“God’s saints still walk the earth,” said the

voice, "only human eyes are too blind to mark them as they pass."

"Ohì, ohì!" The shout in Marco's ears made him spring to his feet and nearly tumble over the side of the little black boat.

A great market barge was trying to squeeze its way along the narrow canal, and it had bumped against his boat. There was a delicious smell of fresh strawberries in the air, for one of the tall baskets had been overturned, and the crimson fruit was scattered amongst the cabbages and artichokes.

"A pleasant spot to lie down and dream in!" said the bargeman angrily. "Out of the way with you!"

Marco drew his boat aside after pointing out that he had as much right to the canal as any overloaded, ill-guided barge; and then, as the further remarks of the bargeman were lost in the distance, he sat down once more and looked up at the Madonna.

There she stood, as calm and cold and stately as ever, while the shadow of the wistaria began to throw long blue patterns across the marble base.

"I wonder," he said, "if it is all really so—if the help is really there, and only our eyes are too blind to see it?"

SANDRO'S SEARCH.

I.

SPRING had come once more to the old city of Florence, and the traces of her dainty fingers could be seen in many a basket of sweet violets, glowing anemones, and scented lilies. Against the old gray walls of the Strozzi palace were piled great sheaves of tulips—large crimson and golden globes, and delicate little pointed red-and-white-striped blossoms—which made a gay show under those frowning walls with their heavy iron rings, and breathed a message of spring and gladness to all who passed.

It seemed, indeed, as if at any turn one might meet the fair Primavera of Botticelli with her dainty flowing robes, dancing along in the soft April sunshine, scattering flowers as she went, and banishing with her gentle breezes the cruel Tramontana, which had been sweeping the city so long with his icy breath. The streets were thronged, for it was the season when the City

80 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

of Flowers drew many strangers into her magic circle and Eastertide was close at hand.

In the poorer quarter of the city, just inside one of the great gates, a woman was working in an attic room very near the sky. Her fingers moved with lightning speed as she plaited the straw braids, and she sang a little soft, cheerful song as she worked, glancing every now and then at the swaddled form of the baby who lay like a little chrysalis on the poor bed close by. A boy of eight stood watching her with impatient, bright eyes, and now and then he gave a tug at her blue apron to turn her attention to himself.

“Mammina,” he said, “if thou wouldst but stop for a moment and listen to me! It is always the straw or the bambinetto that fills thy hands. I wish there was no straw! I wish there was no tiresome bambino!”

“Two very foolish wishes, little Sandro,” said his mother, smiling rather sadly at the impatient face. “If there was no straw, how should I make money to buy bread and polenta and the chestnuts thou dost love so well? And how empty our hearts would be if there was no little brother to love and care for!”

“If only we had lived in the days when saints walked the earth, how easy it would have all been

then!" said Sandro gloomily. "When they were hungry God sent His angels, or else told the ravens to bring them delicious little loaves of white bread. There was no need of straw for them. If a bambino cried all day with pain, they would come and with a touch make him well and strong. Oh, I wish the kind saints were alive in the world now!"

The mother smiled and stopped her work for a moment as she put an arm round Sandro's shoulder.

"There are many, many saints alive in the world to-day," she said.

Sandro impatiently pushed her arm away. "Thou art mocking me, Mammina," he said.

"No, no, little son," said his mother. "It is truth that I tell thee. God has perhaps as many saints to-day doing work for Him in the world as in those olden times thou dost love to hear about."

"But why, then, have I not seen them?" asked Sandro, his eyes growing round with astonishment. "Are they among the priests in the grand procession I saw in the Duomo? Do they all have shining lights around their heads? Have they a guard of angels? Do the tall white lilies grow wherever they tread?"

"No, no," said his mother again. "God's saints to-day have no glory round their heads, no guard of white-robed angels that we can see. They tread the common dusty streets of our town, and no flowers spring up to show where they have passed."

"Then how can we know that they *are* saints?" asked Sandro breathlessly. "How shall I ever find one? I am sure a real saint would be very good to me, and would comfort me when the pain is bad, and even cure the leg that hurts. Canst thou tell me how I can surely learn to know a real saint if by chance I meet one in the street?"

"There are many signs to guide thee," said his mother slowly. "Although they have no light around their heads that we can see, a light of love shines in their eyes. No flowers spring up to mark their footsteps, but their way is sown with kind words, kind deeds, and gentle actions. Is the pain worse to-day, little son, that thou art so anxious to seek for a hidden saint?"

"No; it hurts but little to-day," said Sandro. "I am but waiting to go with thee to the market, as thou didst promise."

"Well, we will start out at once," said his mother, packing away her last roll of plaited straw

into the old basket, and lifting the sleeping baby in her arms.

“Dost thou think, little mother, that perhaps this very day we may meet a saint?” asked Sandro excitedly, as they climbed down the long, uneven stone stairs.

“Who knows?” laughed his mother. “But see that thou dost keep a tight hold on my apron. I would not have thee lose thyself in the search.”

It was a gay, bright world that morning, for the sun was shining and the air was soft, and every one was rejoiced to think that spring had come. There was so much to look at as they went along that Sandro was too busy to talk, and he wished his mother would not walk so fast. There were the shops with their smoking cakes of chestnut flour that invited one to linger and sniff the appetizing smell of cooking, rolled green balls of steaming spinach, pale yellow heaps of lupin seeds, and long wooden sticks with roasted sparrows impaled upon them, nestling between little squares of fried toast. How hungry Sandro felt as he gazed at all the dainties! Then farther on, when they crossed the bridge under which the yellow river rolled, there were great baskets of golden oranges laid out in tempting array. Of course there were other things to look at, but these

84 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

were the things that Sandro saw. He was such a hungry little boy, and being no saint, neither angels nor ravens had fed him with white loaves that morning. Presently, however, when they had threaded their way through the narrow streets, and had come to the square where the people thronged around the flower market, Sandro forgot to long for polenta or oranges. The scent of the flowers was so delicious. He could see the great boughs of pink almond blossom and the yellow rosettes of the banksia roses, high above the heads of the people, against the stone pillars of the market-place.

“See,” said his mother, “if thou wilt stay beside the fountain here, thou wilt be safe enough, and canst watch the people while I go and sell my straw. After that I will return and fetch thee.”

Sandro was only too glad to rest for a while, and the old bronze boar was a great friend of his. He knew each frog and newt that bordered the edge of the fountain, and he loved to polish them up until they shone. But to-day he had no time to spare for old friends. His eyes were round with delight and wonder as he gazed upon the world of rainbow colour. There were banks of velvet pansies—purple, yellow, and white; sweet narcissus, anemones of every hue, crimson roses,

pale pink tulips, and violets of palest mauve and darkest purple. The people went from stall to stall like bees, seeking the sweetest flowers. Stately ladies were there, and peasant women, little fair-haired English girls in dainty dresses, and bare-footed Tuscan maidens with gay handkerchiefs tied over their heads.

Close at hand, near the fountain, there was a stall of tall white lilies which reminded Sandro of the saint pictures he loved so much. Then a happy thought struck him. Why, it might be possible that here, among this very crowd, there might, even now, be passing one of those hidden saints of whom his mother spoke.

Eagerly he looked from one to another. If only the saints still wore a golden halo, how much easier it would be to find them! Suddenly he held his breath, and a great wave of delight flooded his soul. Surely he had found his saint! There before the lily stall stood a tall fair lady in a robe of some soft silken blue. The golden hair that framed her face under her shady hat was like spun gold; fair as any Madonna she stood holding a sheaf of lilies in her arms, and she smiled as she bent her head to smell their perfume.

Sandro pushed his way eagerly up the steps. If he could but touch her blue robe and look into

her eyes, she, being a saint, would understand all about the pain and hunger, without any need of words. Timidly he came closer, and with one little brown hand he tugged at a fold of the silken gown.

The next moment the robe was snatched from his fingers and an angry voice sounded in his ears.

"Dirty little boy, how dare you touch me?"

Sandro did not understand the words, for she spoke in English; but he understood only too well the angry tones, the shrinking back of his saint, and the disgust in the eyes that had never a smile in them now.

"Little vagabond," cried the flower-seller, darting out from behind his flowers, "I will teach thee to soil the robes of the forestiere with thy grimy fingers!" and a sound box on the ears followed this remark.

Poor little Sandro! He did not know which hurt him most, his bitter disappointment or his smarting ear. He crept back to the old bronze boar, and lay there sobbing until he felt a gentle hand laid upon his shoulder and heard his mother's voice.

"What is it, little son? What is it that has vexed thee so sorely?"

It was too difficult to tell the tale there, so he only sobbed out that he was "so tired."

"Never mind," she said. "See, I have sold the straw, and I can carry thee part of the way home." And soon she was trudging along wearily homewards, staggering under the weight of the tired child and the sleeping baby. Little by little as they went Sandro told her about the saint he had found who was no saint at all.

"She had no kind smile in her eyes," he said, "and she spoke no comforting words; and yet she looked so very beautiful."

"It is wiser not to trust to what looks outwardly so fair," said his mother. "The saints, thou knowest, were not always those who looked the fairest."

II.

The next day was the holy fast of Good Friday, and a solemn stillness hung over the city. The bells, which on every other day of the year rang out each hour, were silent now. In every church there had been laid out the day before a little garden which was called the Sepulchre, and in which were placed the instruments of the Passion—the nails, the cross, and the hammer. Sometimes, too, one saw the cock in memory of that sorrowful lesson taught to S. Peter.

88 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

In this busy, noisy world of everyday affairs it was well to step aside for a moment to enter one of the dim, silent churches, to kneel by the little gardens, to look upon the cross, the nails, and the hammer, and remember all that they meant.

Sandro had been too tired to visit the seven sepulchres with his mother the day before, but to-day he limped away by himself to the Church of the Carmine, which was only a little way down the street.

"Perhaps I shall find my saint to-day," he said to himself hopefully. "There will surely be many of them in the church, and I shall learn to know them."

Up the steps he went and into the dim church, which felt chilly after the bright sunshine outside. Only a few people were gathered here, and the church looked very mournful in its black hangings. Only from one lamp shone a faint gleam of light, and by that gleam Sandro could see the figure of our Lord laid out in the garden of pale green grasses. A poor peasant woman with tears streaming down her cheeks was kneeling there, kissing the feet where the nail-prints showed so clearly, clasping her rough, toilworn hands together as she prayed.

Sandro wondered whether this could be a saint. He looked at the worn petticoat, the old coloured handkerchief covering her gray hair, the broken shoes, and he thought it could not be.

"She is just a poor woman like old Nonna," he murmured, and turned away again.

Outside the door he paused to watch a procession of black-robed men pass by. He knew them well, for they were the Misericordia—"Brothers of Pity"—who went about the town nursing the sick and helping those in trouble. Their black, pointed cowls were pulled over their faces, and all that could be seen were their eyes, gleaming through the two eyeholes. No one knew who they were, for it was in this way that they did their good deeds in secret.

Sandro almost clapped his hands with glee as he saw them pass slowly along carrying a litter where, under the black pall, a sick man lay. Why, of course these must all be God's saints. The light that gleamed from their eyes through the holes in the black cowls had always seemed to him so bright that it half frightened him ; and surely good deeds and kind actions marked their footsteps. The great black hats fastened on their backs were certainly very unlike the golden halos of the pictured saints ; but, then, had not the little mother

said that people must not be judged by outward appearances?

So Sandro joined the crowd that followed the brothers, and he limped along as fast as he could to keep up with them. Very soon the procession halted at the hospital, and the black-robed brothers laid down their burden. One of the men stood close to Sandro, and for a moment lifted his black cowl to wipe his brow. He was tired and hot, for the burden had been a heavy one.

"Oh, please," said a little voice at his side—and he felt his robe seized and held tightly—"I have been following thee for so long! Please do not walk so fast!"

"Come, come, be off with you," said the brother, pulling away his black robe somewhat roughly. "What business is it of thine to follow at all? Be off before I give thee the good shaking thou deservest. Children must always try to see all that is to be seen, whether it concerns them or not."

So, after all, Sandro had made another mistake. A saint would have understood that he meant no harm, and that it was not idle curiosity which had made him follow. A saint would not have left him there, tired and shaken with sobs, to creep into the first doorway and cry his heart out.

"Mother," he said, when he had toiled wearily

home again, "thou art wrong—indeed thou art wrong. There are no saints now, and I am so tired and hungry."

"Poor lamb!" said his mother, as she drew him on to her knee and wiped his little dirty face and dusted his weary feet, "thou hast not yet found thy saint, then? Thou must search yet again. But now see, there is a great slice of bread waiting for thee, and who knows but thou shalt have an egg all to thyself when the festa comes!"

III.

Holy Saturday dawned bright and clear, and there was a stir in the city like the awakening of spring. Early in the morning the gates of the city were thronged by the country folk making their way in through the gates. For this was the day when the great sight of the dove and the car of fireworks was to be seen in the piazza of the Duomo.

Sandro was up with the lark, watching the streams of people as they passed. He knew how anxious they were, and how much depended upon that day. For was it not true that if the dove, whirling along the wire from the high altar in

the Cathedral, struck the car fair and square and set off the fireworks without mishap, then it was a sign that the coming harvest would be a good one, and food would be plentiful again?

"Mamma," said Sandro anxiously, "thou art coming to see the dove to-day?"

"No, child," she answered, her swift hands never pausing as she plaited the straws with lightning speed. "I must work hard to-day, that we may hold a real festa to-morrow, and be able, besides, for the dear Lord's sake, to give a little to some one else who is hungry."

A cloud came over Sandro's face, and he kicked the leg of the table crossly.

"Thou art always working, working, and never canst do what I want," he said.

"If thou art a careful, good boy, thou shalt go by thyself to see the dove," said his mother cheerfully. "And perhaps to-day in the great crowd thou mayest find thy saint after all."

"That is true, that is true," cried Sandro gleefully, and he hurried out of the door and downstairs without another thought of the kind eyes that followed him with such patient love shining in them.

Already the crowds had begun to gather round

the Cathedral. The little round baptistery was hemmed in by a great sea of heads, and Giotto's Tower in its white purity seemed to spring like a fair lily, eternally tranquil, from the swaying mass of people below.

Sandro edged himself through the crowd slowly but persistently, and at last made his way into the great Cathedral, and by standing on tiptoe managed to dip two fingers into the holy water font. Even here the crowd was swaying to and fro; but from the high altar to the great doors, which were thrown wide open, there was a passage kept free, and above ran the wire which was fastened to the car outside. There were many strangers there who hired chairs and sat themselves in the front row, laughing and talking as if they had come to see a show; but behind there was many a sunbrowned, anxious face watching in silence to see what fortune awaited the dove that day. Then came a stir as the procession of priests passed in, and the gold-embroidered baldacchino was held aloft over the head of the archbishop.

Sandro had pushed his way well to the front by this time, and stood gazing at the priests as they passed. What gorgeous vestments they wore—crimson, gold, and purple! How the gleaming light of the candles lit up the dark Cathedral, heavy

with incense, and the solemn sound of the chant floated upwards in the dim aisles !

Here and there little boys were darting in and out of the procession, catching the candle drippings that fell on the marble floor ; but Sandro's soul was lifted high above such earthly matters as collecting wax. Surely, he thought, these must be God's saints, clad in such wondrous robes and singing His praises, which, mingled with the sweet blue smoke of the incense, seemed to float up to the very gates of heaven.

The procession paused for a moment, and Sandro found himself close to one of the golden-robed priests. He held his breath, and then took one step forward. Kneeling down, he lifted the lace-edged robe to his lips.

"Out of the way, child !" he heard a deep voice say as the procession prepared to move on again ; and the priest stooped down and gave him a little shake and a backward push, muttering something about the nuisance these children were, so anxious always to collect the wax !

The shake did not hurt Sandro at all and the push was not a rough one, but the sound of the impatient voice and the angry look on the priest's face struck him as if he had received a blow. The priest had looked so like a saint, and the disappoint-

The procession of priests passed in.



ment was so bitter. Sandro limped towards the door and out into the piazza. He did not care where he went—he only wanted to get away from every one—and he did not hear the shouts of warning that rose from the crowd as he walked across the space kept clear around the car, which was dangerous ground.

There were a roar and a rush and a blinding flash. The dove whizzed with terrific speed along the tightly stretched wire, and a great “Ah-h-h!” of satisfaction arose from the crowd as the flint was struck and the fireworks began to go off with wild, terrific cracklings and loud explosions. Surely there was one explosion louder than the rest, and something was seen to fly from off the car and hit the ground.

The crowd pressed nearer and tried to peer through the blue smoke that wreathed the car in wild, fantastic, blending shapes. Then a pitying cry arose as a little limp figure of a child was carried off in the arms of one of the Carabinieri.

“Killed!” said one.

“Struck by a bomb from the car,” said another.

“Nonsense!” said the soldier, pushing his way out. “The child was scarcely touched. He is only frightened, not hurt.”

Sandro opened his eyes and clung tightly to the strong arms that held him.

"Let me go home," he wailed; "I want my mother!"

"Off with thee, then," said the soldier, setting him down, glad to get rid of his burden.

Dazed and shaking Sandro set off homewards. He did not wait to see the garlanded white oxen yoked to the car. He was tired of his holiday, and he only wanted his mother.

It was a very tired, begrimed little boy that at last crept up the long stairs and flung himself into his mother's arms.

"Why, what has come to thee?" she asked anxiously, stopping her busy plaiting and gathering him into her arms. "There, there, do not cry so bitterly. The dust is in thine eyes, and the poor leg is hurting, and thy little inside is empty. We will soon make all that right again."

Very gently she bathed Sandro's face with fresh water and rubbed the aching leg, and then, almost as if he had been a baby, she fed him with bread and milk, and bade him look at the egg which he was to have for the festa.

Sandro lay quiet and thoughtful. He felt so rested and so comforted. The ache in his leg was almost gone, his cheeks felt cool and fresh, and

the bread and milk was very good. He watched his mother solemnly, and just then a sunbeam came stealing through the little high window and seemed to frame her head in a shining ring of light. The very touch of those dear hands had eased his pain. The look in her eyes had comforted his sore heart. She always had something for him when he was hungry ; and now there was a real golden halo round her head.

“Mamma,” he cried suddenly, pressing his cheek against hers and holding his two arms tight round her neck, “why, I’ve been looking outside everywhere for a saint, and thou hast been here all the time !”

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT

THE COMING OF THE KING.

IN the fertile plain of the Val d'Arno the river threads its way like a silver ribbon past many a scattered village and lonely farmhouse, and those who spend their days working here amidst the vines and olive trees must surely have a peaceful, happy time, out of reach of the cares and troubles of city life.

But even here, where the world seems full of peace and sunshine, trouble may creep in; and there was trouble now in the little white house which stood in the midst of the cornfields, where the vines hung in tender green festoons from tree to tree and the olives shone silver white in the brilliant sunshine.

Under the shadow of the broad-leaved fig tree, which grew by the side of the little white house, Silvio lay stretched on the ground, listening idly to the murmur of voices which came from within. He was sure that his grandmother was weeping again, and he wished she wouldn't. It made her forget to cook the dinner, and then there was

nothing but hard black bread to eat. Of course he missed his mother too ; but if it was true that she had gone to be happy in Paradise, why should every one weep and look so sad all the day long ? He wondered whether his father would ever sing and look gay again.

It was all very puzzling, but how could any one be sorrowful when the sun was shining, and the sky was blue, and the cherries were hanging crimson and ripe from the orchard trees ? Silvio stretched out his brown toes in the sunshine, and tried to catch the lizards that darted in and out over the warm stones ; but they were much too quick for him, and slid away like quicksilver before he could touch them. Then he tried turning head over heels, but the sun-baked ground was unpleasantly hard for that game ; and so he lay still once more and peered up at the sky through the pointed leaves of the apricot tree and tried to count the little gray-green velvet balls that hung from the boughs. He wished the sun would make haste and swell them into golden fruit with red-brown speckled cheeks.

“Father,” he cried out, as he saw his father come slowly out of the house, “when will the apricots be ripe ?”

“Not for some weeks,” said his father, “and

before then we may, I hope, be far away from here."

"Are we going away?" asked Silvio, jumping up in excitement—"away from all this?" and he waved his hand towards the fields and the little white house and the apricot tree.

His father nodded, and Silvio looked at him with round eyes of astonishment.

"Are we going to the great city?" he asked. "And will Nonna go too?"

His grandmother had come out, and was sitting on the bench outside the door, and Silvio pointed a grimy little finger at her.

"No," she said sharply, with an angry toss of her head; "thy Nonna has too much sense to go away to that gray distant land they call England, where the sun never shines and the people shiver and die."

"Where it is possible to make a fortune and forget one's troubles," added Silvio's father quickly.

"Oh, but England is such a long, long way off," wailed the old woman, and she gazed with tear-dimmed eyes across to the purple haze which outlined the distant Apennines.

"Oh, it's not so very far," said a gay voice from the other side of the hedge; and Silvio turned hastily to salute the English Signora, whose foot-

fall was so light that no one had heard her coming. She was a guest at the villa, and often walked down to the little white house with her maid, who was Silvio's aunt. Wherever there was trouble the Signora came, and the people looked upon her as an angel from heaven. They were quite sure her medicines could cure anything, and that even to look at her brought good fortune.

"What is this about England?" she asked as she sat down on the seat beside the old woman. Silvio crept close and put out a finger to smooth the silken sheen of her gown, and she patted his hand and smiled at him. But soon her eyes grew grave and rather pitiful as she listened to the torrent of words which the old woman poured out. Her son was too restless and ill to stay at home and work the farm. He had listened too often to the tales his sister told of how fortunes were to be made in England. Now nothing would serve him but to be off and take the child with him.

"Is it not cold and cruel there?" sobbed the old woman. "Will they not both die without the sunshine?"

"But, Nonna," said Silvio, "the sun must surely shine there too; or how do they ripen the apricots, and what do the lizards do?"

"It is not always cold," said the Signora slowly,

"and the sun often shines in our little gray island. But I fancy that Silvio and the apricots and the lizards would flourish best where they are, and it would be wiser not to transplant them."

"I cannot part with the child," said Silvio's father. "He is all I have now, and we must go together."

The talk went on, but Silvio's attention wandered. He wondered whether there was a little cake for him in the bag which hung at the Signora's side. She never forgot to bring it, and he hoped it was a brown one, in the shape of a heart, with a white almond in the middle. Sometimes it was a pink one, and that was good too; but a brown one was nicer, for one could nibble it all round and leave the almond to the last. But suppose she should forget? She looked so troubled, and when she rose to go there were tears in her eyes.

"I know what it must mean to you to part with the motherless little one," he heard her say, as she put her hand gently on his grandmother's bent shoulder. "You see I have two babies of my own waiting for me in that far-away England, and I count the days till I shall see them again."

"May the saints protect both thee and them!"

murmured the old woman, "for thou hast been an angel of goodness to me and mine. As for the boy, one must have faith. I think the Madonna has a special care for those little ones who have no earthly mother to watch over them."

"I am sure you are right," said the Signora gently. Then as she looked up she saw Silvio's eyes fixed anxiously on her face, and she put her hand into her bag and brought out a little white packet.

Yes, it was the brown heart-shaped cake with the almond! How wonderful it was that the Signora always seemed to know exactly what he wanted most! He was sure the Madonna could not be kinder or more beautiful than his Signora, and he wished it was she who was to take a special care of him. It was not pleasant to think of leaving the lizards and the apricots and the little white house, and going to live far away in a strange land; but it could not be such a very dreadful place as his grandmother seemed to think if the Signora lived there.

So Silvio did not trouble his head any more about the future, but sat down to enjoy his cake, and to plan how he could fill his pockets with the cherries which hung so high on the tree.

The sunny summer weather went past; and the

autumn too, after turning the leaves to crimson and gold and filling the vineyard baskets with purple grapes, had in its turn given place to cold, grim winter. The little white house looked dismal in spite of the gay orange lichen which covered its roof, and the bare boughs of the apricot tree shivered in the icy wind. The lizards had long ago disappeared, and the fields looked gray and sad in the pale winter sunshine.

But if it was cold in the sunny plain of the Val d'Arno, what was it like in the little gray island of the North, where winter reigned supreme and froze with its icy breath the ponds and rivers, and powdered the earth with hoarfrost until it looked like a birthday cake? It was truly bitter weather there. The wind nipped unprotected noses until they were blue; it bit toes and fingers and left chilblains behind. Even the children who had warm coats and cosy woollen gloves found it difficult to keep out the cold; but for those who had little outside to cover them, and less inside to line them, the nip was terrible.

This was the country to which poor little Silvio had come, and he wondered if he would ever be warm again. He was not at all like the same little boy who had rolled about in the sunshine under the apricot tree and chased the lizards over

the warm stones. He was thinner and taller now, and his brown eyes seemed to have grown larger as his face had grown smaller. He had learned what it meant to be hungry and cold and miserable and very lonely, for he was all alone now. His father was dead, his grandmother was far away in the little white house, and he was obliged to be out in the streets all day to try to earn enough money to take home at night to the woman who called herself his guardian. With his concertina and his monkey he tramped the streets, and made what he was pleased to call music; while Toto the monkey shivered in his little red coat and refused to dance, but chased the children and tried to bite their heels when they crowded round to tease him.

It was very cold in the wind-swept streets of the gray city. The snow, which was like fine powder, drifted into every sheltered nook and cranny, and the black sky overhead promised more to come. The wind whistled through the bare branches of the trees in the garden, and shook the window frames of the tall houses overlooking the square. It made Silvio shiver and creep nearer to the railings for shelter; but to the two children who knelt by the nursery window above, it seemed a jolly, cheerful kind of wind.

"It's going to be a real snowy Christmas,"

said Jock gleefully ; " Santa Claus will be able to drive all the way in his sledge."

" Silly !" said Jean, with a grown-up air. " He doesn't come over the earth ; he comes through the air and down the chimney. Besides, I am not quite sure if he is real or not. There is nothing about him in the Bethlehem story."

" That is what I can't understand," said Jock. " But then there are so many things nobody explains. Were you listening when they talked about the Christmas play ? It was something about a woman called Eagerheart, who went out to find the King on Christmas morning. And some one said that every Christmas day the King came again, only He did not look like a king, and no one knew Him."

" No, I didn't listen," said Jean. " Tell me more."

" There isn't any more," said Jock, " only that most people passed by and left Him out in the cold, instead of welcoming Him."

" Why, Jock," cried Jean excitedly, " suppose it should be true ! How splendid it would be if we could find Him ! It's Christmas Eve, and just the right time. Perhaps, if we keep watch carefully out of the window we shall see Him pass."

" I don't think it's as easy as it sounds," said

Jock doubtfully. "You see He might look like quite a poor person, and there would be nothing to show who He was."

"Of course, I don't expect a little Baby and the Madonna and S. Joseph and the Angels," said Jean scornfully. "It would be a poor lonely person who was cold and hungry and needed our help."

"There's some one out there by the railings now," said Jock, flattening his nose against the window pane. "I thought at first it was only a bundle, but it moved just now."

They watched eagerly for a few minutes. Yes, the dark bundle was certainly alive. Presently it stirred and sat up, and the strains of a concertina came faintly to their ears.

"It's only the little boy with the monkey," said Jock, with a sigh of disappointment.

"Oh! but I love the monkey," said Jean, peering out joyfully. "I wish we could see it. It scratches itself so neatly, and chases the children when they come too near."

"It must be pretty cold out there," said Jock. "I wonder the boy does not go home."

"Perhaps he's got no home to go to," said Jean. "Perhaps he is very poor and very hungry. Perhaps—oh, Jock, perhaps he is the King!"

"What shall we do?" said Jock, bobbing up

and down with excitement. "It's no use asking Nana; she always says 'Nonsense!' when we make any beautiful plans."

"Let's creep downstairs and go out and fetch him ourselves," said Jean boldly.

The coast was clear. Nana was in the night-nursery getting the baths ready. They could hear her moving about. They held their breath as they tiptoed past the door, and then swiftly ran downstairs and through the hall. It was not very easy to open the front door, for the wind was leaning up against it, and came rushing in the moment the handle was turned and nearly blew them over.

"Quick!" said Jock; and he caught Jean's hand, and together they ran as fast as they could down the slippery steps and over to the railings where the boy was sitting.

It had been a hard day for Silvio. Pennies had been few, and he and Toto were so cold and hungry that they could only sit and shiver there miserably together. Toto certainly had the best of it, for he could creep inside Silvio's jacket and find a little warmth.

They both looked up when the door opposite opened and the light flashed out on the pavement, and they both pricked up their ears when Jock and

Jean stood beside them, and two kind little voices said together,—

“ Won’t you come in, please ? ”

Silvio could not believe his ears ; but he grinned a wide cheerful grin, and jumped to his feet, while Toto chattered wildly and clung to his coat.

“ You see we have been watching for you,” said Jock.

“ And we were so afraid some one else would find you first,” said Jean.

Silvio had not the least idea what they meant ; but they spoke so kindly that he followed them at once into the lighted hall, and helped them to shut the door against the blustering snow-laden wind.

“ Are you very hungry ? ” asked Jean.

Silvio showed a row of nice white teeth as he smiled and nodded.

“ And cold ? ” asked Jock.

Silvio held out his blue hands covered with chilblains, and nodded again.

“ Was it a very long journey from up there ? ” And Jock vaguely waved his hand towards the nursery or heaven.

“ Very, very long,” said Silvio.

“ It must be all horrid and different here,” said Jean. “ Was it very beautiful there ? ”

“ Si, si,” said Silvio, nodding his head vigor-

ously. "Here there is nothing to eat, and very cold; there it was always warm and sunny and beautiful."

Jean quite understood. The one thing that puzzled her was the monkey.

"Why did you bring him?" she asked, pointing a finger at Toto's little solemn face, that peeped out from Silvio's jacket.

"I love him; he is my only friend," said Silvio, hugging Toto closer.

"Don't bother, Jean," said Jock. "I'm jolly glad the monkey has come too. It's splendid luck for us. But we ought to prepare a feast. What shall we do?"

They looked at each other blankly. Nana had cleared away the tea long ago, and there was nothing to eat in the nursery.

"We must get something from the dining-room," said Jean decidedly.

The dining-room door was open, and she could see that dinner was laid. The dessert was set out in tempting array—blue grapes, golden oranges, nuts, and candied fruits. Toto began to chatter wildly as he peeped out and saw all those delicious things. The tempting sight was too much for his morals. In an instant he had jumped from Silvio's arms and flung himself upon the feast, snatching

at nuts and grapes, chattering to himself all the time.

Silvio made a dash to catch his chain; but Toto was too quick for him, and skipped across to the other side of the table in search of fresh spoils. The children nearly fell over each other in their eagerness to catch him; but every time they came near he jumped nimbly aside, dragging his chain behind him and upsetting the glasses with a crash. At last he made a dash for the open door, and skipped upstairs, his hands full of spoils and his eyes full of blinking wickedness.

The children still gave chase, and had almost caught him up, when to their dismay they heard Nana's voice calling to them from above.

"What in all creation are ye doin'?" she was saying; "and hoo cam' yon evil beast in here? And wha's that?" pointing at Silvio.

"O Nana, hush!" cried Jean breathlessly; "you don't know who he is."

"I ken that fine, Miss Jean, and that's what I'm askin'," said Nana. "Hoo cam' he in here, the beggar bairn? Ma certie! he'll gang oot quicker than he cam' in."

"Nana, Nana," said Jock, "you mustn't say things like that—you really mustn't."

"What is all this about?" said a quiet voice,

as a bedroom door on the landing opened and the children's mother came out. She looked with astonishment at the group before her—Toto, in his red coat, grinning and chattering on the banisters, hugging his stolen goods; Nana, looking very large and angry; and a little Italian boy cowering on one of the steps, with Jean and Jock standing on each side of him, as if to protect him.

"And well may you ask, mem," said Nana indignantly; "I canna guess hoo the twa o' them got in, but I'll soon show them the way oot."

"O mummie!" cried Jean and Jock together, "you will understand. You won't let Nana send him away. We found him."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she began; and then Silvio, looking up, gave a sharp cry and darted up to where she stood and seized her hand.

"Signora, Signora!" he cried; "Madonna mia!" And he poured out a torrent of words in Italian which made Nana look more suspiciously at him than ever. She always looked upon foreign tongues as godless things.

But the children's mother caught his little brown hands in hers and spoke to him in the old kindly way, just as she had done when she used to come to the little white house and bring the almond cakes. She listened to his story, and then

turned to the others, who were looking on in great amazement.

"It's all right, Nana," she said. "It's a little friend of mine whom I used to know in Italy. We must feed him and take care of him now, and see what can be done. But I still don't understand how he came here. Who brought him in?"

"We did," said Jock proudly.

"You see we knew he was the King," said Jean.

"What king?" said their mother, hopelessly puzzled. "But never mind; you can explain afterwards. The poor child is half starved and frozen."

It was only when Silvio had been fed and washed, and tucked up snugly in bed wrapped in an old pyjama suit of Jock's, that she at last heard the explanation.

"I heard them say that the King came every Christmas," said Jock, "and that people must watch for Him, because it was not always easy to know Him. He came so often as a poor, hungry person."

"And we looked out of the window and saw the poor little boy, and he said he was cold and hungry, and had left his beautiful country to come here; and so we were sure it was Him," said Jean all in one breath.

Their mother did not answer for a moment.

Her thoughts were far away, and she seemed to be standing in a sunny garden where the lizards darted to and fro and the little gray-green velvet balls hid amongst the leaves of the apricot tree, and she heard an old woman saying hopefully, "I think the Madonna has a special care for those little ones who have no earthly mother to watch over them." And then she thought of that poor stable where long ago the King had lain in His manger bed watched and guarded by His gentle mother, and she knew it was His guiding hand that had led the poor little motherless stranger to her door that night.

"Mummie, isn't he the King, and was it naughty to bring him in?" asked Jean, awed by her silence.

"Do you remember, Jean," asked her mother, "how the King once said, 'Inasmuch as ye did it to one of the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me'? So you see everything we do for one of His children means doing it for Him, and He comes to ask our help always, not only on Christmas morning. But on that day when He came a little helpless child to earth, so poor that there was no shelter for Him but a stable, no cradle but a manger, we specially want to do something to show our love. Only children must learn to be

obedient first and kind afterwards. I think you knew all the time that Nana would not have allowed you to go out."

"Yes," said Jean candidly. "So I just tried not to think."

"But you are glad we brought him in, aren't you, mummie?" urged Jock. "And now we can keep him and the monkey always."

"Indeed, we are going to send him back to his own sunny land as soon as we can," said his mother. "And as to the monkey, Nana will tell you she has enough monkeys in the nursery already. Now, off to bed with you, and tell Nana that you did not mean to be naughty."

It was very difficult to explain to Nana. She did not even approve of Santa Claus or Father Christmas, but called them "heathen notions." Then when they tried to tell her about the King and His coming on Christmas morning, she only said she didn't approve of playing with the Scriptures. But she kissed them, and tucked them up, and bade them be good bairns and go to sleep.

"I don't think Nana liked the monkey," said Jock meditatively.

"I wish she felt a little more welcoming," sighed Jean.

But they did not see her later on when she went

into the little room where Silvio lay asleep. Only Toto's sharp eyes watched her from his basket as she hung up one of her own stout knitted stockings bulging with good things to the knob of the bed, and heard her mutter, "He's naught but a puir bit furrin' heathen, but one must aye be guid to the bairns at Christmas time."

So, after all, Nana too was ready to welcome the King.

ALESSANDRO.

It was Christmas Eve, and the gay city of Paris seemed more gay than ever as it prepared itself for the holiday of the coming festival. The shops, with their tempting array of wares laid out, overflowed almost to the edge of the pavement. The golden pumpkins, piled up at the doors of the fruiterers, seemed to suggest Cinderella's coach and fairyland. The fragrant smell of hot chipped potatoes and roasted chestnuts hung heavy on the air, and most delicious dainties met the eye, from marrons glacés to snails, sealed up in their shells with a paste of pale green garlic.

But Alessandro did not stop to look at the shops. What was the use when he had no money? He trudged along in his baggy trousers and wooden sabots, hugging his fiddle inside his coat, and looking neither to the right hand nor to the left. He had no cap, and his hair was much too long, for the wind blew it into his eyes. He hated long hair, but what would you have? The artists liked it, so it must be suffered.

Alessandro had never stood as a model by himself before. Sometimes he had gone with his father to the big studios, but no one wanted such a very small model. So he usually stayed at home in the little attic room with his mother. It was only stern necessity which had driven him out that afternoon.

"Alessandro, take care of thy mother until I return," his father had said several months before.

There was well-paid work to be had on the railway which was being made in Switzerland, and in a few months he would earn more than he could in a year as a model in the Paris studios. And Alessandro at that time had felt quite proud to be left in charge, and to be the man of the house.

But oh, how he wished now that his father would come home! How could he take care of his mother when the money was all gone, and she was ill, and the little new baby sister cried all day and all night?

To-day a brilliant idea had come into his head, and he dressed himself in his model's dress and took his fiddle, determined to go to the studio where he used sometimes to go with his father, and try to earn a few francs.

It was very cold indeed. The wind swept

through the streets, and blew a thin sprinkling of dusty snow into every nook and corner. He wished they were all back in their own dear land, where the sky was blue and the sunshine was warm, and where there had always been plenty of polenta and black bread to eat.

Presently he came to a great church, and he stopped for a moment.

"It is the festa to-morrow," he said to himself. "I will go in and see if there is a Gesu Bambino."

Very cautiously he pushed open the heavy swing door, and crept into the dim silent church. Ah, yes! there was the presepio, just as he had hoped. In one of the chapels a bed of hay had been spread, and a little manger laid upon it. Inside, of course, was the Gesu Bambino, and the two figures that knelt beside it were S. Joseph and the Madonna, the ox and the ass keeping guard behind.

Alessandro knelt down, put his fiddle on the ground, and then crossed himself reverently. He tried to remember the Christmas prayer, but the words were all confused. Would the Madonna be angry with him because he had forgotten? he wondered. She never seemed as if she could be angry with any child, for she always looked down so lovingly at the Gesu Bambino.

“Madonna mia,” he whispered, “I cannot remember thy prayer, but I would ask for thy aid. The mamma is sick, and the bambino is very small and hungry. If thou canst spare the time, perhaps thou wilt come and help.”

The blue-robed Madonna knelt on silently there. Alessandro knew, of course, that it was not the real Madonna, but only a figure; yet somehow he was sure she had heard, and a feeling of comfort stole into his heart. It was the very time when she would feel most pitiful towards all babies, for the sake of the little Baby who had lain so helpless in her arms.

But time was going on, and he must not be late for the studio; so he rose from his knees, tucked his fiddle once more under his arm, and went out into the busy, noisy street again.

The art students were rather difficult to please that day, as they sat round and watched with critical eyes the models that came in and posed one after the other. There was a fisherman with his net slung over his shoulder, but he was too thin and too stiff. There was a dancer, but she was unsteady, and would not be able to keep her pose for ten minutes; a brigand, but he was too old. One after another men and girls, in all sorts of costumes, came in and were

Alessandro.





rejected; and then, when the old brigand had gone sullenly off, Alessandro climbed on to the throne.

His heart was beating like a drum, and his hands were trembling; but he tried to stand as firm as a rock, and to hold his fiddle steadily under his chin, while he fixed his eyes above the sea of faces around him. There was a sudden silence. For one moment the loud voices ceased to shout directions and criticisms. He looked such a very small model standing there, trying to keep his pose so bravely. The soft hair framing his face gave him almost a baby look, and there was something rather pathetic about the baggy trousers hitched up by the bright coloured belt, and the manly white shirt showing beneath his blue waistcoat. But the silence did not last long, and was followed by a burst of laughter.

"This isn't a crèche," some one shouted.

"Time for babies to be in bed," cried some one else.

And again there was a shout of good-natured laughter.

The slow tears gathered in Alessandro's eyes.

"I am not very young. I can keep a pose well, messieurs," he said.

But it was no use, and they told him to move

on, and make room for the next model; and so he groped his way out to the street again.

"Poor little scrap!" said Francesca, a tall, fair-haired girl in a blue pinafore, who had been looking on. "He is rather a charming bit of colour."

"Yes, but a baby like that couldn't keep a pose for two minutes," said another girl.

"Well, I'm tired of all this noise, and I feel lazy this afternoon," said Francesca. "I shall go and work at home." And she gathered up her brushes, wrapped her old blue cloak round her, and escaped from the hot studio.

In the shelter of a door close by, a small form was leaning against the wall, hiding his face in his arm and sobbing silently to himself. Francesca stopped and looked at him.

"Why, you are the very person I want," she said. "You are the good little model who posed so well. If you have no engagement this afternoon, will you come to my studio and stand for me?"

Alessandro could scarcely believe his ears, but her voice sounded so kind and friendly that he looked up, and tried to see through his tears who it was that spoke to him. Surely he had seen this tall gracious lady before, but he could not remember where.

"Do you wish to come?" she asked again, and this time she talked to him in his soft Italian tongue.

"Si, si, Signorina," said Alessandro, a smile breaking over his face. "I will come immediately. I would be much contented to come."

He held her hand, and trotted along at her side, and then manfully climbed the many flights of stairs that led to her room.

It was not a very grand room, but Alessandro thought it most beautiful, and he looked round in awe-struck admiration at the pictures on the walls, the bowl of lovely flowers on the small table, and the comfortable chair with its soft silken cushions. It was deliciously warm too, and while the Signorina took off her cloak, he went close to the fire and spread out his frozen blue hands towards the cheerful blaze. Then he watched her draw out her easel and put a canvas upon it; so he climbed on to the little throne, and threw himself into his best pose.

"Ecco, Signorina," he said.

"But no," she answered; "we will try a sitting pose this time." And she drew forward the comfortable chair quite close to the fire, and lifted Alessandro on to it.

"Now," she said, "you can sit there and tell me all about everything while I paint."

Alessandro gave a great sigh of content and relief. He was so very tired that he had had a fear that perhaps he might not be able to stand quite firmly for a long time with the fiddle tucked under his chin. He fixed his eyes upon the Signorina, and began to wonder again where he had seen her before. The longer he looked, the more sure he was that he knew her quite well. It was partly the kind eyes and the way she looked at him that seemed familiar, and also the shining light of golden hair round her head, and the long straight folds of her blue pinafore. She was talking to him as she worked, but her voice began to sound a long way off, like the far-away sound of singing in the great church, and he thought he was kneeling once more by the manger-bed, and that the lights were shining down on the blue-robed Madonna, and—and——

"I thought he wouldn't stay awake very long, poor baby," said Francesca, as with very gentle hands she lifted him and laid him to sleep on the settle, covering him with a warm rug.

Then she looked ruefully at the sketch just begun and at the bundle that lay fast asleep on the settle.

"No more work to-day," she said. "A clearly wasted afternoon. But after all it is Christmas Eve."

It was almost an hour before Alessandro stirred and then sat up. He looked round, half bewildered at first, for he could not remember where he was, and then he was terribly ashamed.

"Did I fall asleep, Signorina?" he asked, and his lip began to quiver. A model who fell asleep could never expect to be paid a franc an hour.

"Never mind," said Francesca cheerfully. "You see it is Christmas Eve, so we may take a little holiday. Tell me, then, what you will do for the festa to-morrow."

"We will have no festa," said Alessandro gravely. And then he told her all about the new baby that cried and cried, and how he was the man of the house since his father was away, and how he had come out to earn money because they were hungry.

"I will sleep no more if thou wilt but try me another hour," he said anxiously.

She smiled, and took two bright silver francs from her purse and put them into his hand.

"I think it is time you were going home," she said. "Will you be able to find your way in the dark? I'm afraid it has begun to snow. See, I will come a part of the way with you."

He looked up at her with shining eyes and smiled till all his white teeth gleamed.

"I am very content," he said, and watched her joyfully as she took down her blue cloak and pinned on her hat.

It was snowing hard now, so that it was no easy matter to get along, and Alessandro clung gratefully to a fold of the blue cloak and tried to give directions as to where his home lay. As they passed the shops he lingered a little and looked at the two francs which he held tightly in his hand.

"Signorina," he said, "I must take home many things."

"Shall I do the shopping?" she asked, and with a sigh of relief he put the two francs into her hand.

He had no idea that even such a large sum as two francs could have bought so many things as he saw the Signorina buy and place in a large basket. Then they stopped at a milk shop for a bottle of milk and at the charcoal burners for some sticks and charcoal, and by this time it was quite impossible to carry another thing.

It was not easy to find the way in this strange white world of muffled sounds and blinding snow; but at last he gave a gasp of relief as he recognized the street where he lived, and could guide the Signorina to the door, and then up and up the long stair which led to the topmost attic.

“Will the Signorina have the goodness to enter?” he said, as he pushed open the attic door, and tried to stamp the snow off his sabots before going in.

It was a very bare room into which Francesca groped her way. There seemed to be nothing in it but a bed in one corner and a rush-bottomed chair, but it was almost too dark to see anything. Only a wailing sound guided her to the bed, and then she could dimly make out the figure of the poor mother with the baby lying on her arm.

“Alessandro has brought me to see you,” she said. “I am going to make you more comfortable, if you will let me.”

It was all like a fairy tale to Alessandro. First the Signorina lit a candle, and then set to work to make a fire and to unpack the basket, and the room soon began to feel quite warm and bright. She heated some of the milk, and took the wailing baby on her knee, where presently it was gurgling contentedly as the milk disappeared. Then when the baby was fed there was hot bouillon for his mother, and after that it was his turn to have a share in the good things. But first the Signorina took off his wet clothes and soaking socks, and wrapped him in her own soft white muffler and set him by the fire to enjoy his bowl of soup at leisure. It was not long before the warmth and

comfort made him so sleepy that he could scarcely keep his eyes open, and then he was lifted up and put at his mother's side and covered with a corner of the old blanket.

"Surely it was the saints who sent thee," said the poor woman with a sob in her throat. "I thought the little one was lost, and that I and the bambino were left here to die alone."

"He came to the studio to try to earn money as a model," said Francesca. "Such a funny, anxious little model he looked ! Then he told me all about you and his baby sister, and how you were all alone in this strange city. And I, too, am a stranger here, and so I was glad to think I might do something for some one who was far away from home, for our dear Lord's sake, on His birthday night. But sleep now ; I will stay until morning, and then we will think of some other plan."

It was chilly in the garret room, and Francesca wrapped herself in her blue cloak and sat close to the charcoal fire, after she had washed the bowl and prepared more milk for the baby. It seemed a queer place in which to be spending Christmas Eve, and yet it somehow felt as if it was all just as it should be. Surely all this must have happened to her before in some far-away time which she could only faintly remember ! Her tired eyes

closed once or twice, and then she raised herself and looked round, trying to think more clearly. Then, half ashamed, she realized why it had all seemed familiar ; for as she looked at the bare, poor room, the tiny downy head resting on its mother's arm, and heard the sound of the Christmas bells, she knew that she must have been thinking of the poor stable and the little Child who had come to earth on the first Christmas birthday.

The light was creeping into the sky, and the stars, which had looked down through the attic window all night, were beginning to pale, when there fell on Francesca's ears the sound of footsteps hurrying up the stair, and the door was pushed open. A tired-looking Italian man came eagerly in, and hurrying to the bedside, knelt there, and threw his arms round the mother and child.

"Carina," he gasped, "I could not come before. I did not know of the coming of the little one. Where is Sandro ?"

He had no need to ask that twice, for Alessandro sat bolt upright, and after rubbing the sleep out of his eyes gazed solemnly at his father.

"Thou art come, then," he said. "I am very content to be no longer the man of the house. But, father, hast thou thanked the Madonna ?"

The man rose to his feet and turned swiftly round. He saw a tall, blue-robed figure standing by the fire watching them.

"I went to the church and I asked the Madonna of the presepio to come and help us. She is here," said Alessandro, waving a grimy little hand in her direction.

There was a bewildered look in the man's eyes, and then, to Francesca's dismay, he snatched off his cap, knelt down, and lifting the hem of her cloak, pressed it to his lips.

"Oh no, no," she said quickly, "you must not do that! I am only a friend whom Alessandro found when he came to the studio so bravely to try to earn money for the family."

"The Madonna has her own messengers," said the mother, looking on with shining eyes. And then she told of all the help that Francesca had brought.

"She is my Madonna," said Alessandro stoutly. "She has the golden light round her head and the blue robe. I knew her eyes at once."

"Ah! Signorina," said the man, "the little one is right. It is our Lady herself who comes to us in such a heart as thine, and it was thus that she answered Sandro's prayer."

THE GOLDEN KEY.

THE hot June day in Venice was fading from its golden glow into a paler twilight, but the air was still heavy with breathless heat, and not the tiniest breeze ruffled the green waters that lapped against the broad marble steps. It was pleasant to leave hot rooms and narrow calles and sit out there at the water's edge ; and the children especially loved to gather on the steps and sit and swing their bare feet in the green lapping water.

But in one little hot room, high up in an old house, there were two children who seldom joined the company on the marble steps. The little white-faced boy sat on his mother's knee, his black head resting wearily against her shoulder, while his sister waved an old torn palm-leaf fan backwards and forwards, trying in vain to suggest a cool breeze.

"Mamma, dost thou think it will rain to-morrow?" she asked in an anxious voice.

"Perhaps," said the mother hopefully. "It is

hot enough for July, and there is a feeling of thunder in the air."

Marina's face fell and her eyes began to fill with tears.

"If it rains will there be no procession to-morrow, and can I no longer be an angel?" she asked.

"Poverina," said her mother, smiling, "I had forgotten the festa and the procession and the little white angel. I thought only of Beppino and the hope that cooler air might make him better. But *pazienza*, *carina*; the sky is clear, and there is little doubt that thou wilt walk in the procession to-morrow. Is not thy white frock washed and ironed? And has not the kind gardener promised thee a lily to carry in thy hand?"

"It is a wonderful thing to be an angel, *Mamma*; is it not so?" said Marina earnestly. "It is not unkind to Beppino to pray that the rain may wait until after the festa?"

"No, no; thou art ever a kind little sister," said the mother, smiling upon her, "and I would not have thee disappointed. But these hot days are truly bad for the *bambino*."

"What was it that the doctor meant to-day when he talked about a prison and a golden key?"

asked Marina in a whisper, for Beppino's heavy eyes had closed.

The mother sighed and looked down at the sleeping child.

"He said Beppino was like a little caged bird, who would never be better until he had fresh, good air and plenty of good things to eat. But all that needs money, and so he called it a golden key that would open the cage and let him out."

Marina stood still and thought deeply for a few minutes.

"Is that the only way, Mammina?" she asked. "Dost thou not remember the story of the good S. Peter when he was shut up in prison? Did the angel who opened his door also have a golden key?"

"The angel had no need of keys," answered the mother. "All doors are open to God's messengers."

"Then why does He not open the door for Beppino?" asked Marina.

"Who knows? Perhaps He will," said her mother hopefully. "We must wait patiently."

"But I don't want to wait," said Marina crossly. "O Mammina, if only I was to be a real angel to-morrow I could come and take Beppino's hand and lead him out to the beau-

tiful country where he would grow strong and well."

"Ah! that sounds a pleasant dream," said her mother, smiling. "But thou must remember that although thou wilt by no means be a real angel, yet, when thou art in the procession in the great church thou wilt be there to do honour to God and to the Madonna, and thou must behave thyself as His servants the angels do."

Marina's eyes grew round and solemn at the thought. She had seen the procession of the Corpus Domini before, but to-morrow she herself was to take part in it. Together with Maria, a neighbour's child, she was to be dressed in white, have a veil upon her head, and carry the Madonna lilies through the great church of S. Marco.

"It will be almost as good as being a real angel," said Marina to herself with a deep sigh of satisfaction.

Very early next morning an eager face was at the window looking anxiously towards the east. The festa day was dawning well. The dim, gray morning light was growing warmer every moment, the sky was flushed with pale pink, and the ghostly white palaces reflected in the still water turned slowly from gray to mother-of-pearl.

Not a single cloud flecked the sky where the

moon still hung her waning silver lamp. Nothing was to be heard but the dip of the oars as the boats glided by, breaking up mother-of-pearl reflections, but piling on fresher, gayer colours with their loads of gray-green artichokes, crimson strawberries, and golden gourds.

"Mamma," whispered Marina, touching her mother's hand to waken her, "the sun is rising and the festa day is here. May I begin to put on the angel dress? Maria will be waiting for me in the courtyard by the well, and we will get our lilies and then go together to the church."

The mother's tired eyes lighted up as she looked at the eager little face.

"Move quietly," she said in a low voice. "Beppino has slept but little all night, poor lamb."

For a moment Marina's bright face was clouded as she looked at her brother's little white face.

"I wish I was a real angel," she said sorrowfully to herself.

But sorrowful thoughts soon vanished in the exciting business of dressing. It was not a thing to be undertaken lightly, and from the putting on of her white cotton stockings to the veiling of her curly head Marina grew more and more impressed. It almost felt as if there was something real about it after all. She felt sure she

knew what angels must feel like in their white robes when they set out to do God's service. She did not want to run about and shout as on other days. Angels, she felt sure, walked quietly and never made a noise.

In the courtyard close to the old well, Maria, another little angel, was waiting, and hand-in-hand the children set out, stopping at the corner where the gardener had his great basket of flowers.

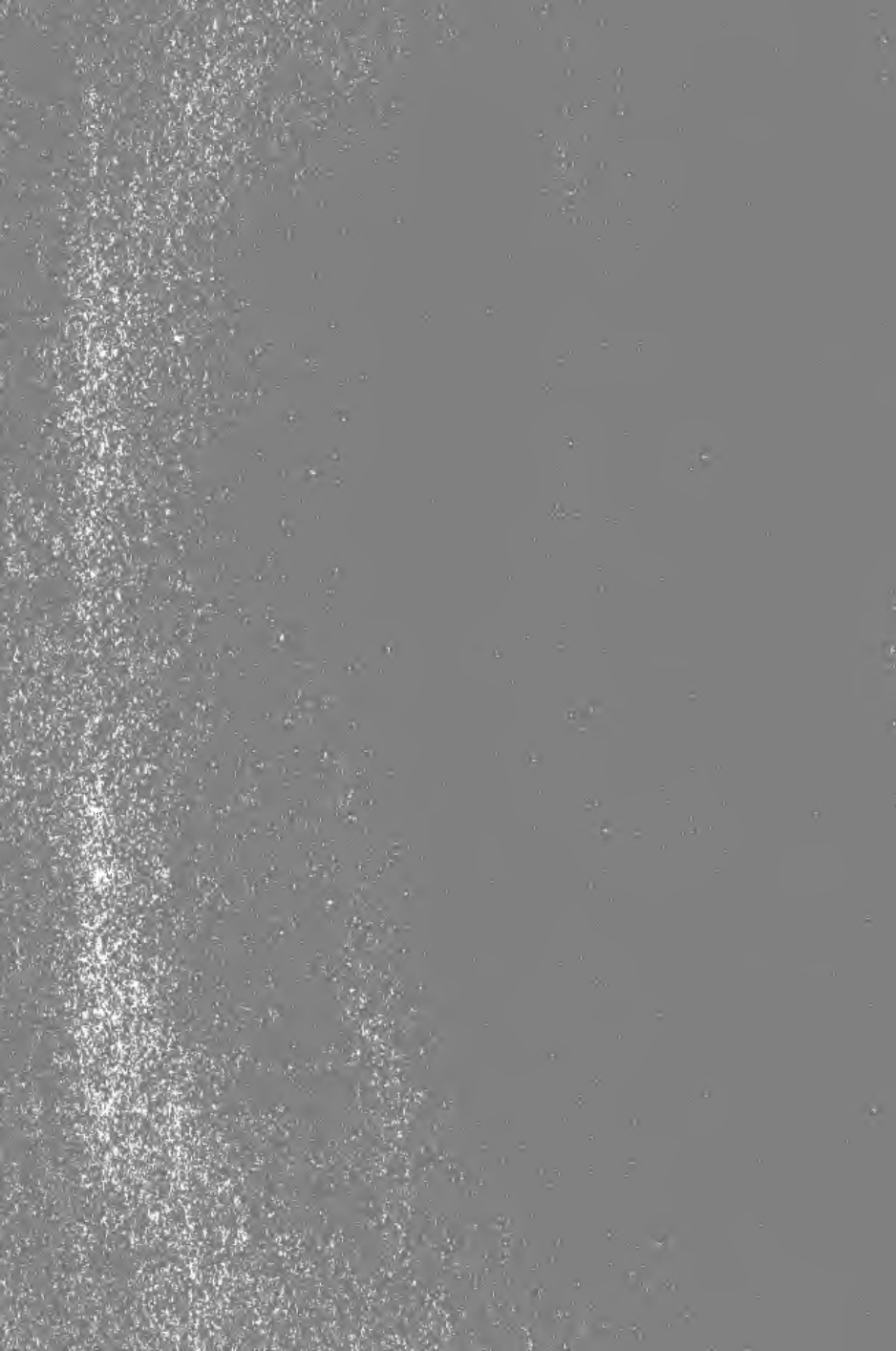
"Here, little angels," he cried, and handed to each a tall stem of lilies. "Hold them straight in honour of the Madonna, and say a prayer for me."

The angels nodded and said their "Thank you," too much overawed by their white robes and saintliness to give even a smile. Then on they went again through streets that began to be crowded now, and as they went the people smiled and said to one another, "See the angels of the procession! Dear little ones!"

In and out of the great portals of S. Marco the people were beginning to swarm like bees, as the two little white-robed figures pushed their way through. There was a busy, humming sound of voices outside, but once within those heavy swinging doors there was a solemn hush which made Marina hold her breath. She often wondered if

The procession wound its way along.





heaven would be more solemn and beautiful than the old mother-church. It was so wonderful to stand there and feel so tiny, and see dome after dome fading away into mysterious golden twilight, colour upon colour glowing from the walls, the floor itself a sea of jewelled rainbow tints, and all around her one shadowy glory of inlaid gold.

It was even more beautiful to-day, for the wonderful cross which hung in the nave was glowing with tiny points of ruby light, and the long silver lamps were each touched with a crimson flame, while before the famous "altar of gold" the smoke of the incense rose in pale blue clouds which floated upwards and veiled the screen with its central Figure and the twelve apostles, and then rising higher still, was lost in the golden dome above where sit the silent cherubim.

The two little angels took their places, and the procession started. Down the side aisle it went and out into the piazza, and those inside could still hear the sound of distant chanting as it wound its way along. Then the great central doors were flung wide, and all eyes were turned to see the procession sweep in.

But instead of the gorgeous procession only two tiny figures in white marched solemnly in. The children had been put in front, and had never dared

to look round; so now they did not know that they had walked too fast and were all alone. Only when they were halfway up the aisle they realized that there was no procession behind them, and the smiling crowd waited to see what would happen. But neither of the little angels was in the least dismayed. If you are an angel in a white frock and veil and white cotton stockings, you are quite above feeling silly and frightened like an ordinary child. Marina only squeezed the other angel's hand tight, and held her lily very straight, and waited for the rest of the procession to come on.

It had all been dim and shadowy in the great church, but now a blaze of light came sweeping in. Tall candles borne aloft by men in scarlet robes came first, then more candles and golden lanterns wreathed with fresh flowers, men in mauve, blue, and green robes to match, more candles and floating silken banners. So the procession swept up to the high altar in a blaze of light which made the old church gleam like a living jewel, and the voices of the choir swelled out their song of victory: "Thou hast gone up on high and hast led captivity captive. Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory; glory be to Thee, O Lord!"

It was all over. The candles were put out one by one. The crowd melted away and solemn

quiet reigned once more in the great church. Most of those who had taken part in the procession had gone home; but in one of the dim chapels, where a calm-eyed Madonna looked down from the altar, one of the little angels knelt on.

"Madonna mia," she prayed, "I have brought thee my lily. It is a little faded, but the sun was hot. It is truly my very own, and I give it to thee. Wilt thou help me to find the golden key which will unlock the door of Beppino's prison, that he may be free to grow strong and well?"

The sound of passing feet fell on Marina's ear, and she drew farther back into the shadow that no one might see her. A grand English signor and signora and a little girl with fair hair paused as they passed her, and talked in whispers a language which Marina could not understand.

"See, mother," said the fair-haired child, "there is the little angel who carried the lily in front of the procession. I wonder what is the matter with her. I think she has been crying."

The lady looked, and then went over to the place where Marina knelt.

"Is there something wrong, little one?" she asked.

The tone sounded kind and comforting, although Marina could not understand the words, and she

looked up with a friendly look in her brown eyes. Then the lady smiled down on her, slipped a shining coin into her hand, and turned to go.

Marina watched her go with grateful eyes. She held the coin tight in her hand, and felt there was no saying what wonders might not happen on this glad festa day. She was shy of strangers, but she wanted to see more of the kind lady and the fair-haired child, and so she followed them at a respectful distance out of the church and across the piazzetta until they stepped into old Giovanni's gondola and sailed away.

The sun was blazing down now, and there was little shade to be found, but Marina crept into an angle of the white marble balustrade and opened her hand to take a peep at her silver gift. She could scarcely yet believe her own good fortune.

The sun shone on the glittering coin, but as Marina looked her face fell. It was not a good, honest, Italian lira at all—it was a piece of foreign money. Then as she looked closer her eyes opened wider with wonder and joy. Yes, it was foreign money, but what was it made of? No silver ever shone with such a yellow glow. It was gold, real gold, she was sure; and in an instant the thought flashed across her mind, "It is the golden key, the Madonna's golden key!"

Ah ! but had the Madonna really sent it? Did it in truth belong to her? She was quite sure the lady had only meant to give her a lira. It was a mistake, and she ought to take it back. But then there was Beppino, who was so hot and tired shut up in the little room. The doctor had said he would be well if they could only find a golden key. It would be so easy to keep it and say nothing. Ah ! perhaps on another day she might have done that ; but to-day she was an angel, and she was quite sure an angel never kept what did not belong to her.

It was a very tired, white-faced, tumbled-looking angel that looked timidly up at the grand gold-laced porter of the big hotel and asked if she might see the English lady with the fair-haired little girl.

At first the gold-laced porter told her roughly to be off, and not to hang about his hall ; but even a gorgeous, fat, idle porter had a soft side, and it was difficult to refuse Marina's pleading look. Besides, it made one feel a little uneasy to be harsh to an angel of the procession. He would think about it.

Then the waiters began to gather round, and as they talked and laughed Marina grew terrified and held the gold piece more tightly in her hand. No, she would not tell them what she

wanted, she would not answer any of their questions.

Suddenly the laughing and talking died away, and the waiters stood respectfully aside as a tall lady crossed the hall. Before any one could stop her, Marina darted forward and caught at a fold of her dress.

"Signora," she panted, "I have come to bring it back."

"Why, it's the little angel," said the lady kindly. "Come upstairs with me, and we will find out what all this is about."

There was a sense of comfort and protection in the clasp of that cool white hand, and Marina heaved a sigh of relief as she trotted by the lady's side. Upstairs they went together and into a beautiful room where the fair-haired child was playing.

"Why, mother," cried the child, "you've brought the angel again."

"She brought herself," said the lady, smiling. "But run away and ask Giovanni to come here. He will tell us what she wants to say."

In a few minutes the old gondolier stood respectfully saluting the lady, hat in hand, and then, catching sight of Marina, he gave her a little nod of recognition.

Very attentively he listened while Marina eagerly told him all that had happened. The words tumbled out so fast that it seemed a wonder he could understand. But he nodded his head gravely once or twice and grew quite excited when at last she opened her hand and showed the golden coin lying there.

Giovanni's English was rather queer, but he prided himself on his good accent, and the lady was quick to understand. As soon as she saw the golden piece she needed no further explanations.

"It was careless of me," she said, "but I did not notice the difference in the dark church. This is indeed an honest little angel. Ask her, Giovanni, why she brought it back."

Giovanni smiled as Marina whispered an answer to his question, and there was a kindly look in his eyes as he said,—

"She must, because this day she is one of the angeli."

A few more questions followed, and then the lady put the golden piece back into Marina's hot hand and closed the fingers over it.

"Take her home, Giovanni," she said, "and tell her mother she has well earned it."

"Mamma, O Mamma!" cried Marina, bursting into the room, "didst thou think I was

lost, and that I would never return? But see, see, the Madonna has sent the Golden Key! It is almost as if I had been a real angel."

And then she poured out the story of the English lady and the golden coin.

There was a stillness in the room when she had finished, and for a moment her eagerness was checked.

Her mother's head was bent low over the sleeping baby, and two great tears had fallen on his downy head.

"Mamma, art thou not glad?" cried Marina again.

"I am thanking God for His goodness," said her mother. "To-day I feared that His angel, who needs no keys, would soon open the door and carry Beppino away from us to Paradise; but instead He has made thee His little messenger, and placed in thy hand the Golden Key."

SIGNOR PICCIONE.

SIGNOR PICCIONE walked up and down in the sunshine in front of the loggia. He spread out his snow-white tail and walked with a proud mincing step. You see he belonged to the nobility, and had no connection with the vulgar gray pigeons that flocked about the stables.

"Look at me," he said to his wife, the Signora Piccione, who walked just behind him—"look at me, and learn to walk as I do."

The Signora was not doing him credit. She did not walk with a grand step, but sidled along in a very nervous manner.

"It is all very well for you to walk so grandly, and think only of your tail," said the Signora Piccione shortly. "I have something else to think about. I am quite sure I saw the green eyes of Ruffino looking out of the darkness behind that pillar."

"Ma che!" said Signor Piccione, "what nonsense! He dare not touch us. I have heard every member of the family tell him that."

All the same, Signor Piccione walked away from that pillar as fast as possible, and talked in a lower voice.

"You are always imagining things," he said loftily.

But the Signora was quite right. Behind the pillar Ruffino the cat lay spread out like a fur mat, the front of his back close to the pavement, and his head laid quite flat in a line with his tail. Only the glitter of his green eyes showed he was alive, as he stealthily watched the white pigeons strutting about.

"Ruffino, Ruffino," called Felicia from the doorway, and Ruffino suddenly sat up, and tried to look like a very mild and gentle cat who took no interest in pigeons whatever.

Felicia, in a blue frock and white pinafore, came trotting out on to the gravel, and scattered the bread crumbs which she had brought.

"Buon giorno, Signor Piccione," she cried; "don't you want your breakfast? Take no notice, then, of that lazy Ruffino. He won't hurt you."

Signor Piccione did not feel quite so certain about that; but if ever a cat looked like an angel without wings that cat was Ruffino, as he sat in the sun and carefully washed his face with a mild, virtuous air.

"Come along," said Felicia suddenly, and she lifted him in her arms, clasping him tightly round his waist; "it is wiser not even to watch pigeons."

"Me-ow-ow-ah," yelled Ruffino. He was very round and fat, and did not like to be squeezed in the middle.

"Nonsense," said Felicia severely. "I am not hurting you, and you are quite greedy enough to eat up the pigeons' breakfast if I left you." And she staggered indoors, Ruffino screaming to the last.

"Now that's much better," said Signor Piccione; "now we can eat in peace. There is a nasty look in that cat's eye which always takes away my appetite."

"Much better," cooed the Signora, making bold now to spread out her tail, and to mince about with a ladylike air.

You see it was no wonder she should put on mincing airs that morning, for what do you think was lying in the nest in the old ruin where she and Signor Piccione had made their home? Nothing more nor less than two white eggs—the most beautiful eggs that ever were seen.

So busy now were Signor Piccione and his Signora with the crumbs and their fan-tails that they never noticed when something gray stealthily

crept out and hid once more in the shadow behind the pillar. Neither of them noticed the glint of green eyes that shone like emeralds in the gloom, as Ruffino watched their every movement.

"I think I'll just fly home for a moment and see if those eggs are all right," said Signor Piccione fussily, when he could not eat another crumb.

"Very well," said the Signora. Signor Piccione always ate so fast and picked out all the best and largest pieces so quickly that her only chance was to make up for lost time when he had finished.

There was a flutter of white wings, and Signor Piccione was gone, and the gentle little Signora minced up and down happily by herself.

The green eyes in the shadow of the pillar narrowed themselves to two shining slits. Ruffino dragged his body slowly along the ground, and laid his head even flatter than before. Then came a spring, a flash of gray fur, one scream from the Signora, a shower of white feathers, and the deed was done.

"O cattivo, cattivo!" cried Felicia, flying out of the open door. "Oh, he has killed the Signora Piccione!" And she sat down on the stone step and cried until her pinafore was quite wet. Then, very sorrowfully, she picked up all that was left of the

Signora Piccione, and carried her indoors to show what that wicked Ruffino cat had done.

Alas for poor Signor Piccione! His wife was dead, and he was left all alone. Felicia tried to comfort him with all the choicest crumbs, but he scarcely ever came now to the loggia. He seemed determined to shut himself up in his house and grieve for the Signora all by himself. Every day Felicia went and looked up at the ruin where he lived, and tried to tempt him to come down; but he never showed himself until the day when the gray pigeon tried to pay him a visit.

Felicia was standing watching below when she saw a common gray pigeon, quite a vulgar bird, fly across and sit on a tree close by. It was watching the home of Signor Piccione too. Presently it could not bear its curiosity a moment longer, and it boldly flew over and looked in at the doorway, quite prepared to go in without so much as an invitation.

The next thing Felicia saw was a very furious and indignant Signor Piccione, who rushed out, caught the gray pigeon by her collar, and bundled her out. I am sorry to say that the language Signor Piccione used was such as to shock even Moufflon, the French poodle, who was sitting watching at Felicia's side, and who often said

quite naughty things himself when he was vexed.

And even after Signor Piccione had disappeared, Felicia heard him mumbling and grumbling and saying bad things all to himself. She could not imagine why he should be so very angry with the gray visitor.

Presently, as she listened, she heard another sound which made her prick up her ears. It was a sort of cheep, cheepy sound which baby birds make when they are very young and can't scream plainly.

"There must be a nest of some sort up there," said Felicia. "Come, Moufflon, and let us look."

But though they both looked most carefully they could find no nest, and at last had to give it up.

Next morning Felicia took some more crumbs, and set out to try to coax Signor Piccione once more. Ruffino, with his mildest face on, offered to come and help her, but she ordered him sternly to be off.

"Via!" she said. "You may try to look so kind and gentle, but you are really as bad as a wild tiger. Via!" and she drove him back into the house.

Then she turned to go towards the old ruin, and at that very moment there was a flutter of wings, and when she looked, what do you think she saw?

There was Signor Piccione as grand and puffed up as ever, walking up to the front door, and behind him came two little pure white pigeons, mincing along and trying to walk as their father was doing.

Then Felicia understood what that cheep, cheeping noise had been, and why Signor Piccione had been so angry with the interfering gray pigeon. All by himself he had hatched those two white eggs, and brought up his two motherless babies. Was it likely, then, that he would allow a common gray pigeon to come and interfere and offer her advice? It was just the sort of thing a common gray pigeon would do; so he bundled her out of his nursery, and to-day the babies were big enough to take their first walk with him.

Felicia knelt down on the ground and spread the crumbs most carefully in case the babies might be frightened. She was so happy she could scarcely breathe.

And Signor Piccione walked up and down more puffed out with pride than he had ever been before, and his precious babies walked behind him and

tried to throw out their chests and spread their tails as well-brought-up pigeons should do.

And Ruffino the cat sighed and looked the other way. He knew now that it was wiser not even to look at a pigeon.

THE MAGIC MIRROR.

THE sunbeams came dancing into the little room where Rosina lay asleep. They shone on her dark curly head, and kissed her round flushed cheek, and tried so persistently to peep under her closed eyelids that at last she awoke.

“Oh dear!” she grumbled; “I wish it wasn’t time to get up.”

But it was. The sunbeams said that quite decidedly, and so did her mother’s voice from the kitchen.

“Come, be quick!” the voice cried. “There is the water to be fetched, and the breakfast to set, and the baby is just waking.”

Now Rosina had rather a pretty face when it was clean and smiling. She had brown eyes and a mop of curly brown hair with threads of gold in it, and there was a delicate rose pink on her cheeks where the sun had kissed her, and when she smiled she showed a row of even white teeth like little pearls.

But that was only when she was clean and smiling.

This morning she was neither. She had only washed a little circle round her nose, because the water was so cold, and her mouth was so cross that both corners turned downwards, and her eyes could scarcely be seen under the black frown that puckered her forehead.

She slipped on her patched petticoat and old camicetta, and looked crossly at her bare brown toes.

"I wish I had shoes and stockings," she said, "and beautiful clothes, and no work to do."

Her mother looked up as Rosina came slowly into the kitchen and most unwillingly lifted the copper pot which was waiting to be filled at the well.

"I wish thou couldst look a little more cheerful, child," she said. "It is no pleasure to look at such a face."

"I am always being scolded," muttered Rosina to herself. It did not improve her temper to have that heavy water-pot to carry, and by the time she had carried it back with aching arms the frown on her face was blacker than ever.

"Here, take the bambino," said her mother, "while I make the breakfast."

The fat baby had been gurgling and smiling, but, meeting Rosina's black looks, he changed his mind, and began to roar and to cling tightly to his mother. Even when his sister had seized him

firmly, and held him tight on her knee, he continued to roar with anger, and to beat her with his little clenched fists.

"Cattivo!" she said, slapping his fat hands, "I am sure I did not want to hold thee, ungrateful one!"

At breakfast she was sure her cup of milk was the smallest, and her piece of bread the hardest; and while she looked discontentedly at it, Tomaso snatched at it and tried to break off a piece. She flew at him angrily, and in her rage knocked over her milk and broke the cup.

The busy mother did not stop to ask who was to blame, but she cuffed Tomaso and shook Rosina, and bade them both be off to school if they could not behave peaceably at home.

"Crosspatch," said Tomaso, "thou canst walk by thyself." And he ran off, leaving her alone.

Rosina wandered along in sullen silence. She never lifted her eyes from the gray dusty pathway, so all the world looked gray and dusty to her. Overhead was the blue sky, and the olive trees spread their branches to make a silver lacework to screen her from the sun. Knots of pink roses, her namesakes, nodded to her from the hedges, but all she saw was a gray dusty pathway and rough stones.

"Every one is hard and cruel to me," she sighed. "Nobody loves me. Mammina scolds and says I am ugly, the bambino screams when I go near him, and Tomaso steals my bread and calls me names."

She was so very sorry for herself that she actually managed to squeeze out two big tears, which rolled down her cheeks and made a clean pathway on either side. It was a cruel, unfair world. Some day all this unkindness would kill her, and she would lie with crossed hands under a wreath of white flowers; and then they would all be sorry and beg to be forgiven, but that would be too late. She was just planning out the sad scene, and refusing to come to life again in spite of all their prayers, when the school bell sounded in the distance, and she was obliged to take up the burden of life once more.

Rosina was not a greater favourite at school than she was at home. She was always looking out for unkindness, and somehow she always found it. Even the good Sister, who smiled so cheerfully on every one else, and who was so patient and kind and so unwilling to punish any one, was hard on her—hard and unjust, Rosina was sure. So what was the use of trying to please her?

This morning, as she hurried in, she saw that

one of the children had laid a bunch of sweet violets on the Sister's chair, and that did not please her either.

"I'm not a favourite," she said out loud with a sniff, as she sat down—"but then I don't bring flowers!"

The giver of the flowers turned round and glared resentfully at Rosina. She had got up early to gather the violets, and had thought only of giving the Sister pleasure, and she had not tried to make herself a favourite.

Rosina saw the unfriendly look and sighed deeply.

"There!" she said, "no one ever looks kindly at me. No one cares for me."

And she was so busy being sorry for herself that she could not learn her lesson, and had nothing to say when her turn came and she stood before the Sister. All the rest of the children had done their lessons so well that they were to have a story now as a reward, but Rosina was told to sit apart from the rest on a distant bench and learn her lesson all over again.

It was only on very special occasions that the Sister would tell them one of her stories, and Rosina thought it cruelly hard that she, who loved stories better than anything else, should be set

to learn a stupid lesson while all the others were enjoying themselves.

It was a beautiful story, she was sure. She listened with all her might, and heard something about a magic mirror, which made her long to hear more, and as no one seemed to notice her she crept closer and closer to listen with the rest.

"Of course," the Sister was saying, "every one wanted to look into the Magic Mirror, because, you see, it held in its silver heart the gift of happiness for those who looked aright and who knew the magic secret. But for those who dimmed the shining surface with cross or unkind looks, the mirror held only sorrow and tears. The gift was ready for each one, however timidly they looked in, and those who had learned the secret found something so wonderful in the shining silver depths that for them the whole world was full of sunshine, and they were as happy as the day was long."

"But where can we find the Magic Mirror?" asked Rosina eagerly. She had quite forgotten she was in disgrace.

"The story is not for thee to-day," said the Sister quietly. "Take thy book and learn thy lesson outside."

Rosina turned sullenly away, dragged her feet

as slowly as possible across the room, and then banged the door.

"No one is ever kind to me," she said gloomily. "I wish there was really a Magic Mirror. I expect it would be easy enough to learn the secret, and then I would be happy all day long, and no one would be horrid and unkind and unfair to me any more."

The longer Rosina thought about it, the more she wondered if there was really such a thing as the Magic Mirror, and if so, where she could find it. The good Sister's stories were always true ones, or at least had a true meaning in them. She never told just make-believe stories.

Now, where could that mirror be found? Was it in some grand palace? No, that could not be, for the Sister had said every one had a chance of looking in. She was sure it was not in church—that was a place for saint-pictures, not for mirrors. Well, she would learn her lesson quickly, and perhaps, if she asked very politely, the Sister might tell her.

The other children were all gone when Rosina stood beside the Sister's chair and said her lesson, and after she had finished she still stood there, threading her brown fingers in and out together, and trying to pluck up courage to ask her question.

She lifted her eyes and looked up timidly into the kind face, and a tiny smile turned up the corners of her mouth that made the sullen frown disappear like magic. And, strangely enough, a smile came into the Sister's eyes too, which before had only looked sad and vexed.

"What is it?" she asked kindly.

"Wilt thou tell me where to look for the Magic Mirror?" said Rosina eagerly.

"It is much more important to learn the secret first," said the Sister. "The mirror is so easily dimmed that it is wiser to bring to it only a shining face. Try first of all how to keep a shining face, and then the rest will follow."

Rosina walked home slowly, thinking deeply, and she arrived so late that a scolding was awaiting her instead of her dinner.

"Late again!" said her mother. "I am tired of waiting for thee. Be quick and fetch the water. Afterwards I will find thee something to eat."

Rosina lifted the copper pot and with a very clouded face went down to the well. She was in no hurry, and she leaned idly over the side and looked down into the clear water below before she began to turn the handle. She had often looked into that shining well, but to-day she started back, and then peered down again in great excite-

ment. Could it be the Magic Mirror that was gleaming down there? Oh, if only she could see into it! If only she could win the golden gift! She almost overbalanced herself as she leaned over to see down more distinctly, her heels in the air.

Yes, it was certainly a clear, shining, silver mirror! And what was that looking up at her from its depths? A very cross, sullen little face, with a tangled mop of curly hair.

"Why, it's just me!" said Rosina, bitterly disappointed. That could be no Magic Mirror; and she began gloomily to fill her water-pot and to carry it in.

"It's very heavy," she said with a frown as she set it down.

"A burden is always heavy to those who carry it unwillingly," said her mother. "Thou hast not yet learned the secret of making thy burdens light."

"It's always my fault," muttered Rosina crossly.

"There! run away and play," said her mother; "but take thy dinner first. I do not want to work thee too hard."

There was much that Rosina could have done, for the baby was fretting in his cradle and wanted to be amused, the plates were unwashed and the

floor unswept, but she was too busy thinking of her own troubles to notice how tired her mother looked.

"I'll go and see Nonna," she said to herself. "She knows all about everything, and will be able to tell me where to find the Magic Mirror."

Her grandmother was sitting plaiting straw near the doorway of her little house when Rosina came slowly up and stood by her side. The old woman laid the straw aside and put her shrivelled, toil-worn hand under Rosina's chin and looked searchingly into her face.

"Let me see," she said. "Thou hast found the world an unpleasant place to-day. No one has smiled on thee. Work has been terribly hard, and thou hast had nothing but unhappiness."

"Why, Nonna, how didst thou guess?" said Rosina, opening her eyes very wide. "It sounds like magic."

"I can read it all here," said her grandmother, still looking into her face, "because I know many secrets."

"O Nonna! dost thou know the secret of the Magic Mirror?" said Rosina, clasping her hands together in great excitement. "Canst thou teach it to me?"

"Gently, gently!" said the old woman. "Tell

Grandmother was sitting near the doorway of the little house.



me first of all about this Magic Mirror, whose secret thou wouldst know."

"Ah!" she said, nodding her head, when Rosina had told her all that she had heard of the Sister's story, "there are others as well to whom the secret of the Magic Mirror has been revealed."

"Tell me quickly, then," said Rosina, and she knelt down close at her grandmother's side. "I want to find it at once, for I am so tired of being unhappy. I thought at first it was hidden in our well, for it looked so like a beautiful shining mirror, but it was just the water, I suppose."

"And what didst thou see down there?" asked her grandmother.

"Only myself," said Rosina.

"Was it a pleasant picture?" said the old woman.

"N-n-no," said Rosina slowly. She remembered the cross, sullen face that had looked up at her from the silver depths, and could not call it a pleasant picture.

"Ah!" said her grandmother, "it is as I thought. It was lucky for thee then that it was not the Magic Mirror. The good Sister was certainly right. Thou must learn to have a shining face first of all before setting out to seek for the Magic Mirror. Now the old well shall be made

to serve thee in good stead. As soon as thou canst see a pleasant, shining face looking up at thee from below, come back and tell me, and perhaps I may tell thee the secret, and help thee to find the Magic Mirror."

Rosina's face clouded.

"Oh, but—" she began in a very discontented voice, when her grandmother held up a warning finger.

"That face would never do for the Magic Mirror now," she said. "Quick! put on a smile at once and try to brighten it up."

It was rather a crooked smile which Rosina managed to call up, but it was better than nothing, and her grandmother nodded approval.

"Now run away home and see if there is nothing thou canst do to help thy mother," she said. "It is the idle people who find it most difficult to smile."

And it really seemed as if her grandmother was right; for when Rosina had run home, and had swept up the floor and washed the plates, it did not seem nearly so difficult to smile at the baby, and he actually held out his arms to her, and patted her cheek with his little fat hand. It was really wonderful how much happier she felt, too.

When her mother left the wash-tub and came

wearily in, it was to find a tidy kitchen and laughing children, and her face brightened as she entered.

"Thou art a good child," she said to Rosina. "Give the bambino to me now, and I will fetch the water to-night. After all it is hard work for thy little arms."

"Oh no!" said Rosina cheerfully, "I want to go to the well." And she set off quite blithely. She put down the water-pot at the edge, and hung cautiously over and looked down into the shining depth beneath.

"It's a little pleasanter," she said, "but it's not very bright yet. I shall have to practise more."

She was staggering back with the heavy pot, when Tomaso crept from behind the door and thrust out a bare leg to trip her up. She did not fall, but at least half the water was spilt over the newly-swept floor, and she felt shaken and very angry. She put down the water-pot and flew to punish the evil-doer, but he was too quick for her and slipped out of the open door. Then as soon as he had put a safe distance between them, he turned and grinned at her in his most aggravating manner.

"Crosspatch!" he cried. "If thou couldst see thy own face, it would frighten thee."

Rosina stood still, and the angry look faded

away. Oh dear ! she had just begun to look pleasant, and now it was all rubbed out and she must begin again. She turned sorrowfully back and went indoors, and began to mop up the water and make the room tidy.

Presently Tomaso's wicked little grinning face peeped in at the doorway. He looked in very warily, ready to disappear at once if the enemy was likely to attack. But, wonder of wonders ! Rosina looked up, and there was actually a queer sort of smile on her face ! Tomaso ceased to grin and looked at her doubtfully.

"Come in !" she said ; "I shan't touch thee."

Tomaso kept a wary eye upon her, fearful of some hidden trap ; but as she still had that queer smile on her face, and went on mopping up the water, he began to feel just a little ashamed of himself, and by-and-by he offered to help. Then they set to work together, and it became almost like a game, and they both enjoyed it.

All that evening Tomaso cast doubtful looks at his sister now and then, and instead of making faces at her, as was his usual custom when he caught her eye, he looked away.

"I'll fetch the water for thee in the morning," he mumbled as he went off to bed, and Rosina was surprised that it was quite easy to smile on him.

“He is not really such a horrid boy as I thought,” she said.

But she would allow no one else to fetch the water now, and each day as she went to the well she anxiously looked down to see if her face was growing fit yet for the Magic Mirror.

Of course there were many times when the clouds came down and hid all the sunshine, and her face looked as gloomy as ever; but each time she chased the clouds away it was easier for the sun to break out again. Her mother’s smile was pleasant to meet now, and, strangely enough, the work did not seem half so hard, and the water-pot was certainly not half so heavy as it used to be. School, too, was quite a different place. It was a nice, sunshiny world; every one was kind to her, and she was very happy.

A sudden thought struck her one day as she sat on the edge of the well. Could it be that after all it was the Magic Mirror she had seen down there? Where else had all this happiness come from? Might it not be the golden gift which the Magic Mirror held in its shining heart for those who looked into it? She would go that very afternoon and ask her grandmother if it could be so.

The sun was shining through the silver leaves of the olive trees, and flecking with tiny rings of gold

the bowed figure of the old woman as she sat busily plaiting her straw, her thoughts far away and a smile upon her face. She started and looked up as Rosina came running along and stood before her. Again she held the child's face between her hands and looked at it intently.

"The world is full of sunshine for thee to-day," she said. "Every one smiles on thee, work is easy, and thou art as happy as the day is long."

"It is the magic secret again," said Rosina, nodding and smiling. "And oh, Nonna, I have come to ask thee to tell me what that secret is, and if it is really the Magic Mirror that I have seen inside the old well."

The old woman sat silent for a few minutes, and she gently stroked Rosina's curly head.

"I will try to tell thee the secret," she said, "and thou must try to understand. The name of the Magic Mirror is Life, and it does indeed hold in its shining heart the gift of happiness or sorrow for each of us. And its secret is not far to seek. Whatever we bring to the Magic Mirror, that is the thing which it reflects and gives back to us. If we bring smiles, we are met by smiles; if we hold out kindly, helpful hands, kindly, helpful hands will be held out to clasp ours. If we bring

love, we shall receive love, which is the greatest gift of all. But if, instead, we bring cross looks and unkind, selfish actions to face our daily life, there will be no golden gift to meet us then, for the mirror gives back to us only what we bring to it."

Rosina puckered up her brows in thoughtful silence.

"I see," she said at length. "It's not really magic at all, but just ourselves."

THE STEEP ASCENT.

SISTER CECILIA sat in the cool green shade of the great tree that spread its branches over the peaceful convent garden. Her hands lay folded idly in her lap, and her eyes gazed dreamily across the misty blue valley with a rapt, unseeing look.

Outside the quiet convent walls the busy life of the old town of Santa Caterina flowed on. There was noise enough in the narrow streets and great square, but only the sound of the bells reached the quiet peacefulness of the convent garden.

It was not often that the good Sister sat idle, but sometimes when anxious thoughts about those in the outside world troubled her she came out into the peaceful garden to meditate undisturbed, and to pray for those who had so little time to pray for themselves. So far away were her thoughts just now that she did not hear the clang of the convent bell nor the sound of soft footsteps crossing the garden path. Then a timid hand touched her habit, and she started and looked round.

"Ah! Caterina," she said, "I was even now

thinking of thee, my child. How fares thy mother and the little ones?"

She patted the thin brown hand that still held her cloak, and smiled kindly upon the young girl who stood beside her.

Caterina's eyes smiled back, and when Caterina smiled she made one think of sunbeams dancing on the blue waters of the lake below, showing depths of clear brown beneath. All the grave responsibility of fourteen years disappeared in the sunshine of that smile.

"She is much better to-day, Sister," she said. "The medicine works like magic, and I have come to beg for more if thou canst spare it."

"I will carry it to her myself," said the Sister kindly; "but meanwhile sit here beside me, for I have something to say to thee."

The smile in Caterina's eyes died out, for the Sister's voice was grave and her face wore a troubled look.

"I would not be hard on thee, my child," she said, as Caterina looked at her anxiously, and nervously pleated her apron into little folds. "I know very well what a heavy burden rests upon thy young shoulders, with a sick mother and the little ones to care for. But, Caterina, I am troubled about thee. When we gave thee the name of our

blessed saint it was with the hope that thou wouldst try to follow in her footsteps. Now it seems to me thy thoughts turn more to earth than to heaven."

Caterina hung her head, and pleated more folds in her apron's hem.

"There is so little time to think of heaven," she said—"there are so many earthly things always waiting to be done."

"When wast thou last at Mass?" asked the Sister.

"Not for many Sundays," said Caterina in a low voice. "It is so difficult to spare the time."

"Ah! that is exactly what I thought," said the Sister sadly. "Of course it is difficult. There is no easy road which leads from earth to heaven. It is a steep ascent and difficult to climb. Thou, Caterina, hast climbed but few steps upwards in all thy fourteen years. Art thou quite content? Hast thou no wish to reach the heavenly gate?"

Tears shone now in Caterina's brown eyes, and there was a sound of a sob in her throat as she answered, "I will try to remember, Sister, and to-morrow I will go to Mass."

"That will be, at least, one step upward," said the Sister, as she smiled approvingly and laid a gentle hand upon Caterina's bowed head. "And

to make it easier I will come and look after thy mother and the little ones whilst thou art gone."

That was good news indeed, and Caterina sped home with a light heart. She thought a great deal about the Sister's words as she climbed the steep, narrow street. It was dreadful to think how contented and happy she was with her mere earthly work, and how little she had thought of heaven. But to-morrow she would make a fresh start. She would get up very early, do all her work, and set out in good time for the Church of Santa Caterina. That would at any rate be one step upward, as the good Sister had said.

The children were clamouring for their supper when she reached home, and each one seemed to be shouting louder than the other. The baby wailed dismally in its cradle, and the mother's weak voice, begging for a drink of water, could scarcely be heard above the din.

"Patience, patience!" said Caterina. "There will be no supper for those that cry out."

A good slice of polenta soon kept the children quiet, a cooling drink put new life into the invalid, and the baby ceased its pitiful wail as soon as Caterina lifted it in her strong arms, and it nestled its little downy head contentedly in her neck.

Caterina certainly had a way of quickly smoothing out all difficulties.

"Mamma," she said, as she sat beside her mother's bed that night, when the children were at last all asleep, "the kind Sister has promised to bring the medicine herself to-morrow. But she was not well pleased with me to-day. I have not been to Mass for many Sundays now."

"I wish I could spare thee oftener," said her mother with a troubled look; "but everything seems to go wrong when thou art away. The children are always wanting thee, and as for me, what should I do without thee?"

Caterina smiled happily. It was good to feel she was wanted, but the thought of the Sister's words soon made her serious again. People who were contented with mere earthly praise ought not to feel so happy.

Before she went to bed she looked carefully for her rosary, and found it in the corner of a dusty drawer. Then she knelt and began to tell her beads, and tried to think of heaven and the saints and to forget about all earthly matters. But try as she might, she found herself wondering how she was going to fit a new patch on that big tear in Francesco's trousers; whether it would be possible to afford a new pair of boots for Maria,

and whether it would be necessary to get more milk for the baby, since it was growing so big. She pulled herself up with a jerk each time her thoughts wandered, and each time as she started afresh her lips moved more slowly and her head nodded more sleepily, until at last prayers, patches, boots, and baby became so tangled up together that she crept shamefacedly into bed, and was asleep almost before her head touched the pillow.

There is surely an imp of mischief which rejoices in working its wiles whenever people are in a special hurry. It seems to delight in hiding away everything that is needed. It pulls off buttons, tweaks off strings, breaks bootlaces, and lays every kind of trap to catch unwary hurrying feet. Caterina fell an easy prey to the imp of mischief that Sunday morning. She had been up and doing since dawn, but the sun was climbing high in the heavens before her work was half done. Never had it taken her so long to dress and wash the children, never had there seemed so many buttons and strings missing, never had things hidden themselves in such out-of-the-way corners!

The children, too, helped the imp to carry out its mischievous plans. Scarcely had Caterina lifted the heavy copper water-pot upon the wooden bench when little Angelo was filled with a desire

to drink out of it, and tried to tilt it forward with both hands towards his open mouth. The pot rocked for a moment, then leaned a little too far, and a fearful howl from Angelo brought Caterina running in from the well to see what had happened. She found a wet and sobbing child lying on his back in a sea of water, and the other children screaming with joy while they hopped about to avoid the streams which were surrounding the cradle, where the baby, like a little Moses, lay wailing in his ark.

As soon as Angelo was dried and comforted, and his big bruise anointed with soothing oil, Caterina turned her attention towards the flooded floor. Francesco and Maria, anxious to help, had been trying to mop up the streams, and had made themselves almost as wet as the floor.

"The saints preserve us!" said Caterina distractedly, as she snatched a gray, dirty rag out of Maria's hand. "To think that thou must needs use my best neckerchief for this!"

Maria's eyes filled with tears that threatened to add to the general dampness, but Caterina mopped them up with the spoilt handkerchief, and told her to run away and fetch the milk for breakfast.

"Something's burning!" announced Francesco, sniffing up the air.

Sure enough, the polenta had stuck to the pot and was black as a cinder, and the breakfast must all be cooked over again.

"Caterina, I tried to carry it so carefully, but some of it's slipped over the edge!" wailed a voice from the door, and there stood Maria with a half-empty bowl of milk, and a blue petticoat like the sky at night covered by the Milky Way.

Well, it did not mend matters to be cross, and Caterina plodded on, and in time the children were fed and the room made tidy, and she was free to start for church, as the good Sister would soon arrive to look after the household.

Caterina sighed as she glanced down at her old blue petticoat—it was so faded and patched; and though her apron and camicetta were clean, they were neither fine nor smart like the festa clothes of other girls. Then, too, instead of her best handkerchief she was obliged to wear the old orange one, which at least was dry.

Still, it was pleasant to set out in the sunshine and to listen to the bells that rang across the valley from Santa Caterina's Church. This was an important day, and Caterina held her book and her beads carefully as she stepped along. She was determined that no earthly thoughts should hinder her prayers to-day.

Suddenly, as she went along, a cry of distress reached her ears. She turned quickly and looked up the street. Those wicked boys were teasing the little crippled Tonino again. Like a flash she was upon them, scattering them to right and left, and dealing out some well-deserved cuffs on their tingling ears.

The crippled boy sat sobbing on a doorstep, and she knelt down and put a protecting arm round his shoulder.

"There, there," she said, "don't cry! They will not dare to come back again."

Tonino clutched her hand and held it tightly. "I wish thou wouldst beat them, and beat them, and beat them!" he sobbed. "They are wicked and cruel, and they steal my crutch so that I cannot run away."

Caterina wiped his eyes with a corner of her clean apron.

"I don't think they mean to be really wicked," she said. "Perhaps if thou wert not so easily angered they might leave thee alone."

Tonino shook his head; he was sure those boys were wicked through and through. Some day he was sure Santa Caterina herself would appear and beat them as they deserved.

Caterina smiled as she thought of the stately

saint condescending to beat those little street ruffians; but she suddenly remembered that it was getting late, and she caught up her book and her beads and started on her way once more.

“Is that thee, child?” called a feeble, cracked voice as she passed the public well at the corner of the street.

Caterina stopped and nodded to old Mariana, who with bent back was stooping down, trying to lift her heavy copper pot of water.

“That is too heavy for thee, Nonna,” she said. And she laid down her book on the edge of the well, and lifted the heavy pot in her strong young arms.

“I knew thou wouldst be ready to help,” said the old woman, as she hobbled along by Caterina’s side. “Not for naught did they name thee after our dear saint.”

Caterina smiled somewhat ruefully. There seemed but little chance that she would ever follow in the saint’s footsteps. The pot was heavy, and the road was steep to climb, and by the time she was back again at the well and had caught up her book the church bells had rung out another half-hour.

“Oh dear! how late I shall be!” panted Caterina, and this time she set out to run as fast as her feet could carry her

But the fates seemed all against her that day. Scarcely had she reached the foot of the hill when a little toddling child came running towards her with unsteady steps, and in its hurry lost its balance and fell in the dust at her feet.

In a moment Caterina had the baby in her arms, had dusted her down and comforted the grazed knees and little bruised, dirty hands. Then she set the little one down and prepared to hurry on again. But the baby had no intention of being left behind. It held on to Caterina's petticoat with a firm grip, and began to screw up its face ready for a distressful cry.

"Oh dear!" said Caterina, lifting her up again, "why canst thou not be wise and good and go home to thy mother?"

But the little one only smiled serenely. She had evidently strayed some way from home, and there was nothing for it but to carry her back. Another half-hour rang out before Caterina had found the distracted mother and given the baby into her arms.

Panting, hot, and weary, Caterina at last entered the great cool church, dipped her fingers into the holy water, and dropped on her knees by the steps of the little side chapel where the picture of the Madonna and the Gesu Bambino hung.

It was terribly disappointing. The service was over, and the people were leaving the church. She had arrived too late. The hot tears stole down her cheeks and fell on her clasped hands. Truly it seemed no use making good resolutions and striving to climb even one little step upward on that steep road which led to heaven !

The sound of moving feet ceased ere long. One by one the candles were all extinguished, and the solemn stillness of the great church was unbroken. Only the little gray chapel still held its one belated worshipper, and the light from the silver lamps before the altar fell on the old orange handkerchief and faded blue petticoat, and caught a glint now and then of tears that slid silently through Caterina's brown fingers.

Presently she lifted her head and gazed at the picture above her. Surely the Madonna would understand that she had done her best and the fault was not entirely hers. Somehow the pictured faces of the Mother and Child seemed to comfort her sore heart, and she quickly brushed aside her tears that she might see more clearly.

The two lamps which hung on either side of the picture cast silvery gleams from their two tiny points of light, and as Caterina gazed and

gazed, the rays seemed to grow longer and longer, until they reached her feet and formed a shining silver ladder leading to the Madonna's throne.

Caterina held her breath in awed amazement. There was no doubt about it. This was no longer a little gray chapel with a picture over the altar. These were the shining stairs which led up and up to heaven—the steep ascent which she had so longed to climb. Oh, if only she dared to set her foot upon that shining path! If only there was a helping hand to draw her upward!

“Come, little daughter—I can help thee up one step at least,” said a voice in her ear; and then, to her joy, she saw her mother's face bending over her. Tonino smiled down on her from the next step, and reached out a frail little hand to help her on. Then old Mariana was waiting just above, and with trembling hands drew her upwards on to another shining step, and her quavering old voice said kindly, “As thou hast helped me, now I can help thee.”

All up those shining stairs, kind, well-known faces looked down on Caterina, helpful hands were held out to her as she climbed. But high above was the most wonderful and comforting sight of all, for there she saw the face of the Holy Child, who, sitting on His Mother's knee, leaned for-

ward and stretched out His little hands towards her. She almost felt already the touch of His hands laid in blessing upon her head.

"Dreaming, my child?" The words fell clearly on Caterina's ears, and she started and looked wildly round. An old priest stood beside her. It must have been the touch of his hands which she had felt upon her head.

"I—I—do not know," she faltered. Then, as she saw the kindly look in the old priest's eyes, she felt sure he would understand, and she poured out all her tale to him.

She began with what the Sister had said to her in the convent garden, and told him of the good resolution she had made. Then followed the tale of all the difficulties that had beset her, and how, after all, she had arrived too late, and had found the service was ended. Her eyes grew very round and solemn as she went on to tell of the shining ladder which had seemed to stretch down from the two silver lamps—those same lamps which now only showed their tiny points of light.

"Was it indeed a vision, Father?" she asked in an awestruck whisper, when the tale was ended.

A gentle look came into the old priest's eyes as he listened.

184 MADONNA OF THE GOLDFINCH.

“Who knows?” he said. “I cannot tell. Perhaps it was sent as a message of comfort to thy heart, my child. This, at least, I can tell thee with certain sureness. There is never a kind and helpful act that does not lift us upwards; never an unselfish, kindly deed done for others that does not help us to mount another step of those shining stairs which lead from earth to heaven, where dwells the Christ to whom we minister when we befriend His little ones, and who waits with outstretched hands to draw us ever upwards, nearer and nearer to Himself.”

THE END.

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN.





